

## Prayer

Gracious Lord, You love us and long to supply what we need to live according to Your will. May we never turn away from any help or blessing You would give; Your sustenance, Your guidance, Your love, Your friendship and Your spiritual gifts. May we then become worthy ambassadors for Your Kingdom, wherever we are, and wherever we go; to Your Praise and Glory; AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*After speaking to a friend, pray about the things you have discussed, and pray for your friend as well*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for the people you meet** *Pray for the people you see on the news, especially those who are the victims of violence*
- *Give thanks to God for the spiritual insights you have been given*
- *Pray for those who are in the news in your country*

## Meditation

Time is a precious commodity;

    Built into creation for us to use by God, our Lord and Creator:

We give our time to You, Lord God;

    Time to think, to pray, to read and also to do Your will:

We give our time to those we love;

    Time to share the precious gifts of love and deep commitment:

We give our time to neighbours and friends;

    Time to give, receive and grow in costly care and friendship:

We give our time to daily work;

    Time to witness to the Kingdom through everything we do:

We give our time to our personal needs;

    Time to take our Sabbath rest, according to Your Word:

Time is a precious gift of God;

    We use it now as best we can; it will not last forever!

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## Bible passage - Matthew 5:1-12(a)

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>7</sup> "Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy.

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

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

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

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

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## Bible Study

### Review

Our passage today contains the famous 'beatitudes' of Jesus given at the beginning of His famous 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matt. 5-7). There is so much of interest in these 12 verses that we will cover them over 2 days, firstly in general and secondly verse by verse. But to begin with, Jesus noticed the crowds following Him and went up on a mountainside together with His disciples, then He sat down and began to teach (5:1). In doing this, Jesus acted much like a Rabbi of His day, but what He said was totally different; Jesus had just preached 'repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand!', and people wanted an explanation of what He was talking about. What was this Kingdom?

The Beatitudes are a collection of short pithy sayings with a characteristic beginning, and their radical nature and powerful content has inspired many. Some believe that because Moses also received the Ten Commandments on a mountain top (Ex 20 etc.), Matthew therefore presented Jesus as a new 'Moses' with new 'Laws'. But we miss the point if we focus on the teaching rather than the Teacher. The rest of the Sermon makes it clear that Jesus' teaching is a culmination of the Old Testament, not a replacement for it (5:17ff), and we should worship not the teaching but God and His Messiah by whom those teachings have come.

There is a clear structure to the Beatitudes which helps us understand Jesus' teaching, and the structure here is very compact, as we will now see. There are nine beatitudes; the first eight are in the 'third person' ('they', 'theirs' etc.), being general teachings of Jesus, and the final beatitude is addressed to the crowd and the disciples in the third person ('you' and 'yours' etc); 'blessed are you, when people mock you ...' (5:11,12). This last beatitude concludes and gives meaning to all the previous ones, and it seems to assume that those who are listening are joining Him on the path towards the 'Kingdom of Heaven'.

Now if we take the first eight beatitudes, the first and the eighth finish with the phrase 'the Kingdom of God is theirs', so they have special significance, given that the 'Kingdom of God' is the important issue on everyone's lips. Read together, they say that the Kingdom of God belongs to the 'poor in spirit' and also those who are 'persecuted for righteousness'. We now find out what this means by looking at the rest of the Beatitudes.

The first of these qualities 'the poor in spirit' is clearly an inner characteristic, but interestingly, the next three are also 'inner spiritual qualities'; those who mourn (5:4), who are meek (5:5) and who 'hunger and thirst for righteousness' (5:6); in fact, they go together to explain what it means to be 'poor in spirit', so Beatitudes 2,3 and 4 help us understand what Beatitude 1 means! This means we do not have to look anywhere else to try and work out what Jesus means by 'poor in spirit', because it is given within the beatitudes themselves! Now, if you look at the second half of each verse (5:4,5,6), you can similarly say that these match up in the same way; the 'Kingdom of Heaven' (5:3) is a place where there is comfort (5:4) and satisfaction (5:6) and where the earth is 'inherited' as well (5:5)!

When put together like this, you will see that we are beginning to say quite a lot about the Kingdom of God and the people who inherit it. But we are not finished. In today's world, we like our lists in number order, but not so the ancients. They liked their lists to go one way and then the other (in scripture, this is called 'chiastic' listing), and we find that what we have just discovered about the first four Beatitudes is true of the second four, but in reverse! So number 8 is explained by numbers 5,6,7! Those who are persecuted are the merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers! Clearly, the teaching in the second half of the Beatitudes is that those who, in the midst of persecution, remain merciful, maintain integrity, and are peacemakers, are worthy of a 'reward' which is 'great in heaven' (5:12).

Lastly, there is no hint here that any of us can just 'do' these things by ourselves; for as verse 11 makes clear, these are characteristics of those who follow Jesus; and this implies faith and devotion. Matthew will have much more to say in his Gospel about such 'faith', but it is essential for the whole Sermon on the Mount that we observe from the beginning that Jesus' teachings are supposed to reflect those who follow him. Without the simple faith of discipleship, Jesus' teachings are impossible to do.

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

## Going Deeper

Our passage today contains the famous 'beatitudes' or 'blessings' which Jesus gives at the beginning of his teachings in Matthew's Gospel. Chapter 5:1 begins the first of several teaching blocks in the Gospel and it lasts three full chapters until 7:28,29 'when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for He taught them as one having authority ...'. These chapters together are called the 'Sermon on the Mount'.

There is a great deal to look at as we launch into Jesus' teaching, and it will take two days for us to study the Beatitudes firstly as a whole, and then verse by verse. I hope you enjoy what is, for me, the privilege of studying the teaching our Lord gave, via Matthew, in this Gospel.

At the beginning of our passage, Jesus notices the crowds and then goes up a mountain, sitting down like a Rabbi, with the disciples around listening to His every word. Did the crowd come as well? Some traditions say that they did not, and that the 'Sermon' was given only to the disciples; this idea is based upon Jesus' general avoidance of crowds (Matt 8:18) in favour of the disciples and the fact that it does not actually say that the crowds went up the hill (v1).

How then did they get there towards the end of the session, and report being 'astonished at His teachings' (Matt 7:28)? It is likely that Jesus did not prevent the crowd coming, but simply focussed on gathering the disciples, who would themselves have been the source of detailed information about the Sermon. It is also unlikely that Jesus would have discouraged the crowds, because He often had compassion on them (Matt 9:36) and twice fed them (Matt 14:13ff and 15:29ff). The Messiah had, after all, come to save the people!

Nevertheless, the disciples, and we only have four of them called and identified at this point, have the advantage of sitting close to Jesus, to hear His every word. Jesus had already declared that the Kingdom of Heaven was 'at hand', and the questions must have been buzzing; 'what did this mean', and, 'if this is so, what happens next'.

### **The Teaching of Jesus**

Beatitudes, or 'blessings', are short pithy sayings beginning with the phrase 'blessed are ...' which were used as a teaching method in Jesus' day. They occur in plenty of scriptures (Matt 11:6, 13:16, 16:17, 24:46; many in Luke and the OT), but this is the only place, Old or New Testament, or even in Greek literature as a whole, where they appear as a large grouped collection. These sayings are unique in many ways.

The radical way in which these 'blessings' are given and their powerful humanitarian content has inspired many, including those outside Christian faith. Also, because Moses received the teachings of the Covenant and the Ten Commandments on a mountain top (Ex 20, 33,34), and Jesus gave the new teaching about the Kingdom of God on a mountain, some believe that Jesus is presented by Matthew as a new 'Moses' with new 'Laws'. Mountains did indeed have great significance for ancient peoples; principally, they worshipped the gods on them. Only a mountain, surely, would be good enough for God's new Revelation.

But we miss the point if we focus on the teaching rather than the Teacher. The rest of the Sermon makes it clear that Jesus' teaching is a culmination of the Old Testament, not a replacement for it (5:17ff), and we should worship not the teaching but the Messiah who God has given us and by whom those teachings have come. At the end of the Beatitudes, the focus is clearly on Jesus as the Messiah who offers a blessing to those who suffer because they believe in Him (vv11,12); the details of the teachings themselves are not emphasised. Jesus is himself the focus and the embodiment of these teachings, as we shall find out many times over in the Sermon on the Mount. It is no use taking the humanitarian 'bits' of this passage and separating them from the Messiah.

### **The structure of the Beatitudes**

It should not surprise us that the Beatitudes have a clear structure. It is very common for scripture to present teaching in structured lists and patterns, because the structures themselves help us to memorise texts. It is unfortunate that few people today make a discipline of memorising even those texts in scripture that are designed for such use. However, the structure of the Beatitudes is in fact quite compact, and it helps us see their message and how they all focus on Jesus and the Kingdom of God.

There are nine beatitudes. The first eight are in the 'third person' ('they', 'theirs' etc.), that is, they are the words of Jesus spoken generally. The final beatitude is addressed to the crowd and the disciples in the second person ('you' and 'yours' etc) 'blessed are you, when people mock and persecute you ...' (v11,12). This last beatitude gives meaning to all the previous ones, as here, at the end, Jesus speaks directly to the disciples (and the crowd), and the 'blessing' is not a brief memorable phrase but a small address; quite different from the others.

If we take the first eight beatitudes, the first and the eighth finish with the phrase 'the Kingdom of God is theirs'. Given that the 'Kingdom of God' is the important issue on everyone's lips after Jesus' preaching, these two verses are crucial to our interpretation. Read together, they say that the Kingdom of God belongs to the 'poor in spirit' and also those who are 'persecuted for righteousness'.

The first of these qualities is difficult to describe, and we shall look at it in more detail tomorrow. However, it is clearly an inner characteristic of a person; the spiritual quality of those who will, through Jesus, inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. Interestingly, the next three beatitudes describe those who mourn (v4), who are meek (v5) and who 'hunger and thirst for righteousness' (v6). All of these are 'inner spiritual qualities' as well. These next three beatitudes help us understand what the first one means. We do not have to search any further to understand what 'poor in spirit' might mean; the meaning is given within the beatitudes themselves! Jesus tells us within the beatitudes that the 'poor in spirit' are indeed those who mourn, who are meek and who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Also, if you look at the second half of each of these verses, you can similarly say that the 'Kingdom of Heaven' (v3) is a place where there is comfort (v4) and satisfaction (v6) and it ultimately includes the earth as well (v5).

When put together like this, I hope you see that we are beginning to say quite a lot about the Kingdom of God and the people who inherit it. But we are not finished. In today's world, we like our lists in number order. Not so the ancients. There are many examples of sequences in scripture that start one way and then go back on themselves (many Psalms, Amos 5, some speeches in Job, parts of Judges etc.). Such sequences are called 'chiastic'; for example, the number sequence 1,2,3,4,3,2,1. Another example of a 'chiastic' sequence is this: 'I took the jam out of the cupboard, I put it on the table, took the lid off and left it for the meal; after the meal I put the lid on, took it off the table and put it back in the cupboard'! I hope you can see why the ancients often used a 'chiastic' structure to describe something that was complete; everything ends up where it began, representing completeness!

In the Beatitudes, our 'completeness' is the Kingdom of God, with which the structure begins and ends (v3 and v10). We have already seen how the first beatitude (v3) is explained by the next three (vv 4,5,6). Now, in a chiastic structure, the next three verses (vv7,8,9) should explain the last verse (v10); and they do. This second group of beatitudes concern not the inner, but the outer qualities of those who inherits the Kingdom. Beatitudes 5 (the merciful - v7), 6 (the pure in heart - v8) and 7 (the peacemakers - v9) are all outward qualities which explain the outward quality defined final in verse; those who are 'persecuted for the sake of righteousness' (v10). You may see my point, but be cautious about the 'pure in heart' (v8), but I will have to ask you to wait on my explanation tomorrow of why I think that 'pure in heart' here means an outward 'integrity' or 'honesty' before God and others.

Clearly, the teaching in the second half of the Beatitudes is that if, in the midst of persecution, you can remain merciful, maintain your integrity, and be a peacemaker, then you are worthy of the 'reward' that is 'great in heaven' (v12). I would even suggest that the reward in the Kingdom of Heaven is more than hinted at in the second half of each verse of this second group of beatitudes; our reward is to obtain God's mercy (v7), to see God (v8) and be called God's children (v9).

### **The Kingdom of God, by faith?**

Lastly, there is no hint here that any of us can just 'do' these things, for, as verse 11 makes clear, they reflect the Kingdom of God and the persecution of Jesus, and are only our experience if we have 'followed' him, like the early disciples. That implies faith and devotion. Matthew will have much more to say in his Gospel about what we might call 'faith' in Jesus, but it is essential for the whole Sermon on the Mount that we observe from the beginning that Jesus' teachings are only understandable by 'following' him. Without this elementary faith of discipleship, the teachings are very hard, and sometimes they are virtually impossible to do, as we shall find out.

If we, like the first disciples and the crowd, had come to hear Jesus teach about the Kingdom, we would have heard Him speak about the inner and outward qualities of those who would both follow him for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, and also be persecuted. We would have to decide whether we wanted to continue to follow Jesus, but that may have been part of his aim!

## Application

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group what you mean by the 'Kingdom of Heaven'.
2. In what way does the 'chiastic' structure of the Beatitudes help us find out more about the Kingdom of Heaven?
3. Which Beatitudes speak most clearly to you, and why?

### **Personal comments by author**

*It is hard to get one's mind around a tricky concept such as this, but it is worth it. The benefits of reading the Beatitudes in the knowledge that it is not just a random list are immense, and should not be lost, even if it seems odd to us initially. Over the years, I have found that these things grow on you!*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Over a period of time, dwell on the Beatitudes, and learn them, first the initial four, and then the second four. Lastly, learn the very last one which gives them all a somewhat prophetic context.*
- *Spend a day in fasting to pray to the Lord to help you be the kind of disciple who is 'poor in spirit' and who live for the 'Kingdom of Heaven'.*

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## Final Prayer

O Lord, may we find peace through our love of You and the love of our families. Remove from our lives the spirits of tension and division which create trouble and distress, and open our eyes to the precious nature of the relationships we enjoy. May they remain secure in You; AMEN

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