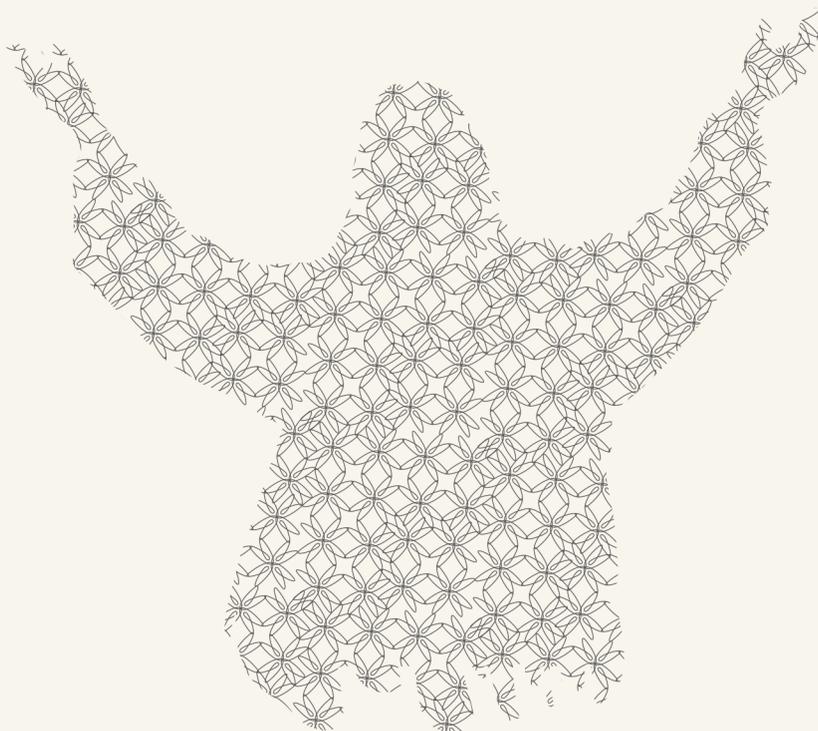


DIALOG

The Beatitudes

LIVING A BLESSED LIFE



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the poor in spirit

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. He said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"

(Matthew 5:1-3).

How would you start a revolution? This was the question facing Jesus of Nazareth. He was the Son of a carpenter, living in Roman occupied territory. The printing press was 1400 years in the future and the Internet was 2000 years away. Yet in Matthew 5, we read His announcement of the arrival of a new order: the kingdom of heaven.

What we know as the “Sermon on the Mount,” had a greater impact on world history than the “shots heard round the world” that launched the American Revolutionary War or World War I. It is truly the sermon heard round the world. Like most revolutions, the one that Jesus started began with a statement of principles. We know them as “the Beatitudes.” Countless Christians have memorized the Beatitudes, but may not understand their significance. Some Beatitudes like Matthew 5:4 sound like they contradict common sense. “Happy are those who mourn. . . .” (GNT). How can people in the depths of sadness be called happy? Those who look deeply at the Beatitudes will discover the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.

Who was Jesus of Nazareth who first spoke the Beatitudes? This was the question Matthew answered first: “This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1). Two thousand years later, Matthew’s words may not communicate with the same power that they did to his original audience. Contemporary readers may wonder, Why begin with a genealogy? What does “Messiah” mean? Who are David and Abraham? Translated into today’s headlines it might read:

The Promised One Finally Arrives
Ancient Prophecy Comes True

What Matthew’s first readers understood was that “Jesus is God’s Promised One (Messiah) who will save His people, bless the world, and keep His



promises to Abraham and King David.” Matthew used chapters 1-4 to present the evidence to support these exciting claims.

1. The Messiah had to be a descendant of Abraham because God promised to bless all the peoples of the world through one of Abraham’s descendants (Genesis 12:1-3).
2. The Messiah had to be a descendant of David because God promised to “establish the throne of . . . [a descendant of David’s] kingdom forever” (see 2 Samuel 7:12-13).

Matthew began his gospel by tracing Jesus’ family tree to show Jesus met both of these requirements. The two covenant promises to *bless* (Abraham) and *establish a kingdom forever* (David) come together in the first Beatitude.

Jesus had the required heritage; however, the right heritage alone was not sufficient to be the Messiah. Matthew provided additional evidence from the prophets to support his claims:

1. Isaiah 7:14—born of a virgin (Matthew 1:18-23).
2. Micah 5:2, 4—born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:3-7).
3. Hosea 11:1—called out of Egypt (Matthew 2:12-15).
4. Jeremiah 31:15—survived a slaughter of innocent children (Matthew 2:16-18).
5. Isaiah 40:3—preceded by one calling God’s people to repentance (Matthew 3:1-3).
6. Isaiah 9:1, 2—came from Galilee (Matthew 4:12-16).

Matthew cites three groups of witnesses to the fact that Jesus was the promised king that would bring blessings to all.

1. Wise men from the east (magi) recognized a new star signified that new king was born in Judea. They followed his star and brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2).
2. At Jesus' baptism ". . . a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased'" (Matthew 3:17).
3. Jesus attracted large crowds by unexplainably healing the sick, a sign of the kingdom of heaven arrived (Matthew 4:23-25).

Matthew quotes Jesus announcing the new kingdom. "Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near'" (Matthew 4:17).

In four short chapters, Matthew carefully prepared his readers to pay attention to Jesus' teachings that unfold in chapter 5. He prefaced everything that followed with His manifesto of the new kingdom, the Beatitudes.

Reflect on this . . .

Considering what was available during Jesus' time, what options did people have to bring about dramatic and lasting change?

Why do you think that Matthew focused on Jesus' heritage, connections with the prophets, and contemporary witnesses to Jesus' Identity?

When did you first hear of the Beatitudes and what do you remember about what you learned about them?

In chapter five, Matthew turns his attention from Jesus' background to His teachings. "*Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down*" (Matthew 5:1). Contemporary leaders often go to a high place, such as a stage, so they can be seen. It is unusual for them to sit down when they are ready to speak. However, in Jesus' time, it was customary for teachers to sit. Rabbis sat to begin instruction in synagogues, so Jesus sent a clear signal to His followers when He sat down on the mountain side. It was time to teach.

Recognizing the signal, "His disciples came to him and he began to teach them" (Matthew 5:1). It is important to note who was in the crowd. It included Jesus' disciples. Like all great speakers, Jesus knew His audience and tailored His teachings to fit their needs. He did not need to elaborate on details that He and His followers already knew. They were familiar with the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings in the Old Testament. Those without this background would likely miss much of Jesus' meaning. Like sports fans who communicate easily because of shared knowledge, Jesus was able to communicate much with few words. Matthew made it clear that this teaching came directly from Jesus when he wrote, "He opened his mouth and to teach them saying . . ." (Matthew 5:2). Writing materials were rare and expensive. However, Matthew thought that it was worth it to drive home his point and emphasize that these teachings came straight from the Messiah's mouth.

Reflect on this . . .

How does it feel to be part of conversations where everyone seems to know what is going on but you?

How important do you think it is that the Beatitudes came directly from Jesus to His disciples? What does that mean for His followers today?

Jesus chose His words carefully as He began His Sermon on the Mount. He said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (5:3). But how can anyone who can claim the kingdom of heaven be “poor” in anything? Clearly something out of the ordinary is going on here. The first Beatitude signals a radical departure. The values of the kingdom of heaven may contradict prevailing cultural norms.

Then, as now, material wealth was often interpreted as a sign of God’s blessing. The flipside of this belief was that the poor deserved their poverty. They or their ancestors may have been involved in misdeeds or simply lacked initiative. Viewing poverty as divine punishment for wrongdoing was comforting to people with great wealth. Those who believe that the poor deserve their poverty feel little or no responsibility to make life better. They interpreted their wealth as a sign of God’s approval.

However, Jesus did not stop with saying that the kingdom of heaven belonged to the poor. He said it belonged to “the poor in spirit.” If being poor meant having no resources to help one’s self, then being poor in spirit would include people who recognize that they are spiritually helpless. They have no way to save themselves. Only those who recognize that they are poor in spirit will realize that they are totally dependent on God.

In Jesus’ time, there was no shortage of religious and spiritual options. The Romans had a pantheon filled with gods and goddesses and all wanted something from people. The Egyptians had their own set of gods and an

elaborate view of life after death. *The Book of the Dead* was a guidebook to the afterlife. Many wealthy people paid fortunes to be mummified and have a copy of *The Book of the Dead* personalized and buried with them. They hoped that its magical spells would keep their hearts from telling on them during judgment.

Judaism offered different pathways as well. The Sadducees advocated careful observance of Temple liturgy, rituals, and worship. The Pharisees promoted devotion to the law, regular prayers, and Torah study. Zealots wanted to restore the kingdom of Israel by the violent overthrow of the Romans.

There was no shortage of sects. Some advocated earning salvation by doing good works. Others created eclectic blends of ideologies, philosophies, and elements of other spiritualities to create mystery religions. These groups promised to reveal secret knowledge to their initiates.

With the first Beatitude, Jesus swept away these approaches to salvation. He let His followers know that the kingdom of heaven belonged to those who recognize their complete poverty before God. Only by recognizing their total dependence on God and His grace could anyone hope to be part of the kingdom of heaven. For Jesus, the good news was that the new kingdom was for those who recognized that they needed God and could do nothing to save themselves. The kingdom of heaven was a kingdom built on God's grace.

“He said: Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). ●

NOTES:

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The Beatitudes

LIVING A BLESSED LIFE

Do you look at the Beatitudes as a list of different kinds of Christians with different strengths? Many people do. Yet in this scripture, Jesus is actually painting a consistent portrait of citizens of the Kingdom who are:

- utterly dependent upon God
- merciful
- repentant
- pure in motives and intention
- humble
- actively seeking peace and justice
- driven by the desire for righteousness

Discover why those who live as described in the Beatitudes are likely to find themselves both at odds with, and misunderstood by, cultures built on radically different assumptions. Learn why, while we are blessed to be members of a different Kingdom, we will still face difficulties for the sake of righteousness.

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