

# Beatitudes

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Scripture Text: Matthew 5:1-12

**Lesson Synopsis:** Participants will be invited to consider the meaning of the Beatitudes and seek application for daily life. In pursuit of this goal, three possible meanings will be debated and discussed, and each will be applied to daily life. The lesson will end by focusing on the 9<sup>th</sup> beatitude about being persecuted because of loyalty to Jesus and apply will apply this beatitude to today's context.

## Digging In

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### Introducing the Sermon

The beatitudes begin the Sermon on the Mount, one of the most famous sermons of all time. In setting the scene, Matthew tells us that Jesus has been ministering to crowds of people, many of whom are ill and demon-possessed (4:23-25). Now, seeing the crowds, Jesus sits on a mountain to teach his disciples (5:1-2) (Jewish teachers sat to teach). The placement of the sermon on a mountain is significant, because it recalls another significant mountain-top experience. It was on Mt. Sinai that Moses received the Law. Now on a mountain, Jesus interprets that same Law in new and authoritative ways. Jesus, then, is seen as greater than Moses, and the words of his sermon reveal the intent of God. It is well, then, for us to listen!

### The Beatitudes

As Jesus sits on the mountain to teach, he begins with one of the most famous passages in the Christian scriptures: the beatitudes. While this passage is well known and celebrated, its interpretation is a point of disagreement among Christians. The traditional view of the beatitudes names them as virtues of the kingdom. An alternative interpretation names them as revealing the scope of God's kingdom. Still another seeks to combine the views already mentioned. Rather than choosing one view over the others, all three will be explained below after a preliminary section on what it means to be "blessed."

## Blessed

*Makarios* is the Greek word that begins each of the beatitudes. It can carry the meaning of being blessed, fortunate, or happy. These different meanings are seen in the below translations of Matt. 5:3:

NIV, ESV, NASB, KJV, NKJV	“ <b>Blessed</b> are the poor in spirit...”
J.B. Phillips	“How <b>happy</b> are the humble-minded...”
Living Bible	“Humble men are very <b>fortunate</b> ...”

In each case, the idea is that the people whom Jesus speaks of are well-off. They are to be congratulated<sup>i</sup> for the attitudes and dispositions that they possess. Importantly, they are not blessed simply because they are poor in spirit or mourn or hunger and thirst for righteousness, etc., but instead because of what these attitudes lead to. The people addressed in the beatitudes are fortunate, blessed, and happy because God they will receive good things from God (theirs is the kingdom of heaven, they will be comforted, etc.). To be blessed, then, is to stand as the recipient of God’s goodness. The reason for that goodness will be explored below.

## The Beatitudes as Virtues

The traditional view of the beatitudes is that they are virtues that God approves and rewards. According to this view, Jesus is telling his disciples about the attitudes and practices that are applauded in God’s kingdom and is encouraging them to become people who reflect these attitudes. As many a preacher has said, “The beatitudes are ‘be attitudes.’” Jesus is teaching his disciples the kind of people they should be. If this is the case, then the beatitudes should be interpreted something like the scheme below, which is taken from David Garland’s commentary on Matthew:

The poor in spirit	Those who acknowledge their spiritual poverty before God/humble
Those who mourn	Those who mourn “their own sins and the sins of the world”
The meek	Those who rely on God rather than their own strength/gentle
Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness	Those who desire “to see God’s will accomplished in their lives”
The merciful	Those who display mercy through forgiveness and kindness
The pure in heart	Those whose inner lives are godly and lead to moral purity
The peacemakers	Those who are committed to bringing

	peace to relationships, both their own and others
Those who are persecuted because of righteousness	Those who suffer for devotion to God’s way

As can be seen, each beatitude describes something that should be a part of the believer’s life because each is approved by God. Importantly, God’s way of valuing things is different from the that of the world, which does not often reward virtues like humility (acknowledging our spiritual poverty), mourning sin, meekness, desire for holiness, etc. While the world may applaud these virtues occasionally, it is often those who ignore them who “get ahead” in the world. According to this interpretation, Jesus is helping his disciples understand the kind of life that both welcomes God’s kingdom and of which God approves.

### The Beatitudes as a Statement of Grace

While the traditional interpretation of the beatitudes as virtues has much to commend it, some commentators have pointed out that it requires us to read into the text things that are not readily apparent. For instance, Jesus speaks of the “poor in spirit” and not “those who acknowledge their spiritual poverty.” Likewise, he speaks of “those who mourn” without mentioning anything about mourning specifically for sin. With these critiques in mind, these commentators argue that these phrases should be taken at face value, which calls for a different approach to the beatitudes as a whole. Rather than being a list of virtues, the beatitudes become a statement about the vast expanse of the kingdom of God that leaves no one out. This understanding calls for an interpretation of the beatitudes that follows the scheme below, which is taken from Dallas Willard’s *The Divine Conspiracy*.

The poor in spirit	The “spiritually bankrupt or deprived”
Those who mourn	Those in the midst of grief
The meek	The “shy ones, the intimidated, the mild, the unassertive”
Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness	Those “who burn with desire for things to be made right” (perhaps because they have been wronged)
The merciful	Those who display mercy through forgiveness and kindness and can therefore be taken advantage of
The pure in heart	The “ones for whom nothing is good enough, not even themselves,” “perfectionists”

The peacemakers	Those “who are always in the middle” of disputes and are therefore like by neither side
Those who are persecuted because of righteousness	Those “who are attacked because of their stand for what is right”

In this reading of the beatitudes, the doors of the kingdom of God are thrown open to everyone. Here we have a list of those that we might think are excluded or overlooked: the spiritually bankrupt, those with reason to mourn, those caught in the middle of fights, etc. Yet the kingdom of God is for these as well. Even the spiritually bankrupt have a place in this kingdom as they come to Jesus. Importantly, the kingdom of God is not for these people *because* they are spiritually bankrupt or in the midst of mourning (as in the virtue reading), etc. The kingdom is theirs *despite* these realities in their lives. Far from a list of virtues to be imitated, this is a list of the dropouts of the world whom God will not exclude. The beatitudes according to this understanding become an amazing statement about God’s grace. No one is excluded from the kingdom so long as they come to Jesus, not even the unworthy and overlooked.

### The Hybrid Approach

While the beatitudes read as a statement of grace is compelling, it, like the virtue model, requires us to read into the text things that are not readily apparent. It is a jump, for instance, to label “the pure in heart” as perfectionists, and the merciful and peacemakers could just as easily be read as virtues pleasing to God rather than referring to the excluded and overlooked. With this in mind, a third approach seeks to marry the two options already given. In this scheme, the first four beatitudes are statements of grace (the kingdom is even for the spiritually bankrupt, mourners, the meek, and those who have been wronged), and the last four beatitudes are descriptions of virtue (God is pleased with the merciful, the pure in heart, the peace makers, and those who suffer for doing good). Thus, the first four are those in need of the kingdom, while the second four are those dedicated to kingdom principles. Importantly, those dedicated to kingdom principles can minister to those in need of the kingdom. While this reading is also compelling, it can be asked whether Jesus meant for the beatitudes to refer to two different groups of people.

As can be seen, each of these readings of the beatitudes has its merits and problems. Further attention will be given to their merits in the application section below. We turn our attention now to the last beatitude concerning suffering for Jesus.

## The Ninth Beatitude

In thinking of the beatitudes, it is helpful to see the first eight as something of a poem with both the first and last beatitudes promising the kingdom of heaven and all of them speaking in generalizations (blessed are those...). After finishing this poetic unit, Jesus addresses his disciples directly (blessed are you...) with a final beatitude that no doubt would have gotten their attention. He states, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." In saying these words, it seems that Jesus expects his disciples to meet opposition in the world because of their allegiance to him. He therefore lets them know that they should understand themselves as blessed, happy, and fortunate when they face these difficult circumstances, for their reward in heaven will be great. More than this, Jesus compares his followers to the prophets who were rejected for their message. Far from being outside of God's will when they are persecuted, Jesus' followers will be in the center of God's will like the prophets were when they too were persecuted. In speaking this beatitude, Jesus prepares his disciples for suffering by pronouncing them blessed in the difficulties of persecution.

## Application

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Because the beatitudes have been interpreted in so many different ways, it can seem daunting to assign to them a specific application. After all, if we're not sure how to understand them, how can we apply them? True, it is difficult to nail down one specific understanding, but as we shall see, the interpretations outlined above each point to different aspects of the gospel that can inform our lives with God.

To begin, reading the beatitudes as virtues for emulation provides us with a good idea of the attitudes and practices expected of the Christian. Thus, the beatitudes can help us to consider our Christian walks by giving us a standard by which to measure our lives. Some preachers have explained this in terms of a ladder of virtues that each must build upon the last. Acknowledging our need for God (poverty in Spirit) leads to mourning for our sin, which leads to relying on God's power for our lives rather than our own and hungering and thirsting for God's righteousness to be present in us. This hunger then leads to the practice of mercy because we have been shown mercy. Purity of heart comes next as we begin to ask God to transform our thoughts and attitudes, and we also commit ourselves to peace in our relationships. All of this culminates in standing firm in the midst of persecution for goodness. If we understand the beatitudes in this way, we can climb the ladder to see if we have incorporated these virtues of the kingdom into our lives. Thus, thinking of the

beatitudes offer opportunity for self-evaluation, repentance, renewed reliance on God, and transformation in our lives.

Reading the beatitudes as a statement of the limitlessness of God's grace gives a lens through which to see ourselves and others. In regard to ourselves, we can sometimes be critical of our faults and disqualify ourselves from what God has for us. Yet the beatitudes declare that no one who calls on Jesus will be excluded from the kingdom! Even the spiritually bankrupt have a place if they will take the step of faith. This gives us hope for ourselves because it helps us to see the radical compassion of God. Rather than being beyond his reach because of our shortcomings, we find that God is right beside us calling us to salvation in Christ. In regard to other people, the beatitudes invite us to be gracious like God. While the world may overlook those mentioned in the beatitudes, we are challenged to see them as God sees them. More than this, we are invited to take up the call of Jesus who pronounces that no one is beyond the grace of God. In all of this, we are confronted with the radical grace of God both for ourselves and others.

Using the hybrid model, we are able to highlight both grace and virtue. The kingdom of God is truly for the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – those the world would leave behind. At the same time, God approves of the merciful, the pure in heart, peacemakers, and those who suffer for doing good. This view is especially helpful in calling us to see that those committed to kingdom ways can minister to those in need of the kingdom. Ultimately, each interpretation given can point us in good directions, and each can find footing in the story of Jesus.

A final application comes with Jesus' ninth beatitude. In a culture that is pushing the Church to the margins, we can feel threatened and unsure. Indeed, it can seem like things are coming unglued! Into this uncertain context, Jesus speaks a word of both comfort and calling. Persecution is not something foreign to the Christian experience. In fact, Jesus often describes it as the norm (Matt. 10:16-24, John 15:18-25). In the beatitudes, he let us know that we are blessed when we are persecuted for his sake. While we should not seek such persecution out, we should not shrink from it if it comes. No, we are called to stand faithfully with Jesus. (Of course, this should be done graciously as we represent Jesus to the world.) Far from being punished or out of God's favor when we find ourselves standing against the world that persecutes, we can be confident that in these moments we stand in God's favor and are blessed.

## Teaching Helps

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**Icebreaker:** To get people talking, begin with the following question, “What is your favorite TV show of all time and why?” Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.

**Time for Sharing:** Ask class members if there is anything from last week’s readings in the gospel of Matthew that they would like share with the class. Did they have any important insights? How about questions? If a person asks a question, open it up for class discussion. If needed, write it down and make a note to do further research or ask the pastor about it during the coming week.

**Lesson Introduction:** Let the class know that today’s lesson will come from Friday’s reading and will focus on Matthew 5:1-12, a passage known as The Beatitudes. Invite people to open their Bibles to this passage.

**Scripture Reading:** Ask a class member to read Matthew 5:1-10.

### Blessing:

- **Question:** Ask participants what it means to be blessed by God.
- **Explain:** Explain that the word translated “blessed” in the beatitudes is the Greek word *makarios*, which can be translated as “blessed,” “happy,” or “fortunate.”
- **Question:** Ask participants to name the people who are blessed in the beatitudes and write them in a column on the left side of the board. Stop with the eighth beatitude about being persecuted for righteousness’ sake. We will return to the ninth later in the lesson.
- **Question:** Ask participants if the list looks like a bunch of people who have been blessed by God. Why are these people blessed?
  - Answers will probably revolve around people being reward for attitudes and behaviors.
- **Explain:** Explain that there is debate over whether the people being blessed in the beatitudes are being rewarded or being shown grace.

### Naming the Blessed:

- Using your column of blessed people on the board, ask the class to explain what each description means. (What does it mean to be poor in Spirit? etc.) On the board, group their answers into a column of virtues rewarded by God and a column of difficulties overcome by God’s grace. The board will end up looking something

like this, though the class probably will not fill in all of the blanks, and the headings will not yet have been added:

<b>Blessed are:</b>	<b>Virtues</b>	<b>Difficulties</b>
Poor in spirit	Humble/acknowledging need for God	Spiritually deprived/bankrupt
Those who mourn	Mourn for sin	Grieving
The meek	Gentle/Reliant on God	Timid/overlooked/bullied
Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness	Desiring God's way in your life	Desiring for wrongs to be put right (because you have been wronged)
The merciful	Showing kindness and forgiving	Being taken advantage of because you are kind
The pure in heart	Committed to purity	Perfectionist
Peacemakers	Bringing peace to relationships	Caught in the middle (and not like by either side)
Those who are persecuted because of righteousness	Suffering for doing good	Suffering for doing good

- Once the class has finished naming meanings, let them know that other meanings have been suggested and fill in any meanings that have been left out.

### Identifying the Difference

- **Question:** With the columns now completely filled out, ask the class to how columns 2 and 3 are different from each other.
- **Explain:** Explain that column 2 is a list of attitudes and practices that are approved of and rewarded by God. Write "Virtues" over this column.
- **Explain:** Explain that column 3 is a list of difficulties in people's lives that God overcomes. Write "Difficulties" over this column.
- **Explain:** Explain that people are blessed in column 2 *because* of these qualities and that people are blessed in column 3 *despite* these qualities. Column 2 is a list of virtues to be rewarded. Column 3 is a statement of grace that lets us know that not even the spiritually bankrupt, grieving, or wronged will be excluded from the kingdom.
- **Question:** Ask the class which interpretation of the beatitudes they think is better.

### Application

- **Explain:** Explain that each interpretation of the beatitudes leads in a different direction.
- **Question:** What applications do we get from understanding the beatitudes as virtues? Be ready to talk about the ladder in the “Application” section above.
- **Question:** What applications do we get from understanding the beatitudes as difficulties overcome by God? Be ready to talk about grace for ourselves and others.
- **Explain:** Explain that some commentators understand the beatitudes as a combination and highlight those with the virtues of the kingdom ministering to those in need of the kingdom.

### **Blessing and Suffering**

- **Scripture Reading:** Ask a class member to read Matthew 5:11-12
- **Question:** Ask class members if they think the USA is becoming more or less Christian in its values. How does this make them feel as Christians?
- **Question:** Ask what the responsibility of the Church is in a culture that is increasingly hostile or ambivalent to Christian values.
- **Question:** Ask what the 9<sup>th</sup> beatitude tells Jesus’ followers about times of swimming against the stream.
- **Question:** Ask if anyone in the room has experienced the kind of treatment Jesus mentions in this beatitude. Be ready to note that many Christians around the world suffer from far worse and that while we often feel uncertain in the US, we do not often experience the more extreme forms of persecution.
- **Question:** Ask if we as Christians consider ourselves blessed when we swim against the stream of our culture. How can we do so?

### **Closing Points**

- The beatitudes challenge us consider the quality of our lives before God, to embrace radical grace for ourselves and others, and to consider ourselves blessed when we suffer for our faith.

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<sup>i</sup> David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 1999), 53–55. Garland translates each of the beatitudes as beginning “Congratulations to...”