

## 13. The Sermon on the Mount (Part 1)

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One of the best-known sermons and the most studied in the history of the world was preached by the carpenter of Nazareth, Jesus Christ. This discourse, which we find in the gospel of Matthew, chapters 5, 6 and 7, is generally referred to as "The Sermon on the Mount." It contains many passages and expressions that are known and quoted by Christians and even by non-Christians all over the world. Some say it contains the best-known teachings of Jesus but the least understood and least obeyed.

Before reading the sermon, it is useful to notice the end of Matthew chapter 4, where the general theme of Jesus' preaching is given. In verse 17, we read, "From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" In verse 23, the author added, "And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people." In these verses, we learn that Jesus called the Jewish people to repent and to prepare for the coming of the kingdom of heaven. Its coming was near.

The kingdom is no longer near; it has been here for 2,000 years, but it still remains for each one of us to choose to enter it. All the spiritual blessings that God offers are for those who are citizens of the kingdom. When Jesus spoke with Nicodemus, he said that it was necessary to be born again, born of water and the spirit in order to enter the kingdom. We enter it by faith and baptism. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is going to make known the kind of person who will be able to enter his kingdom and the kind of life that is expected of its citizens.

He began his sermon with what we call the beatitudes. As you will see, a beatitude is a proclamation of blessedness because of a promised gift or honor. It is also a call to adopt a given attitude or behavior.

"And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying, 'Blessed are the poor

in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'" (Matthew 5:1-10)

Each beatitude is composed of three elements: a blessing, a condition and a promise. The "blessing" part is the word "blessed" or "happy." The condition part specifies the sort of person who will be called "blessed," for example, the poor in spirit or those who mourn. And the promise part is where Jesus says: "The kingdom of heaven is theirs" or "They shall see God."

### THE PROMISES

For all eight beatitudes, Jesus gives essentially the same promise but he expresses it with a different image each time. Those to whom the kingdom belongs are also those who will be comforted, who will be filled, who will receive mercy, who will see God and who will be called sons of God. The promise is that those who meet the conditions that Jesus named will be accepted by God, forgiven, welcomed to Paradise and recognized as the people of God, as His children. Even the expression "to inherit the earth" does not refer to this physical earth but to the Promised Land which is our celestial homeland, the inheritance that God has promised to the faithful.

### THE CONDITIONS

What are the conditions that Jesus announced for those who would be part of his kingdom? What are the character traits of its citizens?

The first trait is poverty of spirit. In Revelation 3:17-19, Jesus was addressing a group of men who did not possess this quality. He told them:

“Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich... As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.”

These people were the opposite of “poor in spirit.” Being poor in spirit is to be humble, to recognize oneself as a sinner and incapable of saving oneself. If you are not poor in spirit, you cannot take the first step to enter the kingdom. If you do not know that you are a sinner, there is no point in speaking to you of the grace of God and the death of Christ for your sins. The humble are the only ones who receive the kingdom of heaven because they are the only ones who seek it.

The second group that Jesus proclaims “happy” are those who are “mourn,” or who are sad. This surely has to do with those who have what God refers to as the sorrow that leads to repentance, those who are sad about having done wrong. “Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death” (2 Corinthians 7:9,10).

James 4:8-10 contains the same idea: “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.” It is necessary to mourn for our sins; God will raise up those who humble themselves.

The third beatitude speaks of the “meek” or gentle. Gentleness here is not weakness or timidity. The Bible says that Jesus was meek and humble in heart, but he was very courageous. In Greek, this word was originally used to describe a wild animal that had been tamed or domesticated. A wild horse is full of strength and energy, but it is not useful to anyone. When it is tamed and trained, it can

transport a man or pull a plow or a chariot. Just as animals must be trained and subjected to the will of people, people must submit themselves to God’s will. A meek man is not weak, but he has submitted himself to the influence of God in his life. This is why James 1:21 tells us to “receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”

Then Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Righteousness in this context means all that God has commanded us to be and to do. “He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous” (1 John 3:8). Hunger and thirst indicate a strong desire. If you want to be eternally happy, you must desire righteousness as a man dying of hunger and thirst desires food and water. He does not think of anything else.

The fifth beatitude proclaims the blessedness of the “merciful.” Mercy is compassion for the misery of another, compassion that is expressed in action. This action could be giving physical or material help, or it could be the granting of forgiveness. It is more than pity, which is an emotion rather than an action. Compassion is shown toward those who are misfortunate or to those who are guilty. Jesus taught about mercy toward those who are misfortunate in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) and mercy toward the guilty in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35).

Blessed also are “the pure in heart.” Here Jesus puts emphasis not on ceremonial or ritual purity, which was dear to so many Jews, but on internal purity. It is sin, often hidden in the heart, which renders man impure or defiled in the sight of God. But the word “pure” also carries the idea of that which is without mixture. A pure heart is sincere. It is not divided between two contradictory loves. This is why James 4:8 tells double-minded men to purify their hearts. This refers to those who want to serve God, but not with their whole heart. A part of their heart is dedicated to the things of the world.

The seventh group of “blessed” people is composed of the “peacemakers.” Jesus speaks here of peace in the sense of agreement and harmony among people. When one considers the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21, at least half are sins

against our fellow man (hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy). Our devotion to God is not acceptable if we do not seek peace with others. “Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves” (Romans 12:17-19).

The last beatitude is for those “who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.” As the last verse indicates, peace does not always depend on us. There will be situations when others will be against us because we are trying to be good and righteous or because we are Christians. We are happy in spite of persecution—even because of persecution—but under two condition: 1) it must be for the sake of righteousness; and 2) we must remain faithful in the test, without denying the Savior. “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter” (1 Peter 4:15,16).

## CONCLUSION

The attitudes recommended in the first three beatitudes correspond to conditions in the plan of salvation. It is the poor in spirit who see their need for a Savior and who accept belief in Jesus. It is the people who are saddened by their own sins who are ready to repent of them. Those who are meek submit themselves to God in obedience to the gospel in baptism, and they continue to submit themselves by living a faithful Christian life.

The next three beatitudes speak of priorities that Jesus tells us to adopt. Following the will of God must be the most important thing in my life. Thinking of others before thinking of myself—in other words, showing mercy—must also be a trait in my life. Thirdly, I must purify the inward man, my heart, in order to be completely acceptable to God. Inner purity comes before external purity.

The last two beatitudes teach that we must seek peace, not only with God, but also with people. However, we must never renounce faith in Christ in order to be at peace with men.

Are you a person Jesus would call blessed? Are you in the kingdom and cultivating the qualities of a good citizen of the kingdom?