

# **A BRIEF COMMENTARY ON THE “BEATITUDES” OF JESUS FROM MATTHEW 5**

**By: William H. Scarle, Jr., B.A., M.Div., Th.M.**

## **AN INTRODUCTION**

The “Beatitudes” are among the first things that usually come to mind when we mention the teachings of Jesus. Matthew certainly thought they were central to his Rabbi’s message. He places them immediately following the “Temptation of Jesus” and at the beginning of “The Sermon on the Mountainside.” Actually the entire teaching on this occasion was not directed to the crowds gathered on the hillside to hear this new teacher from Nazareth. Jesus was **actually addressing his disciples, and describing for them the way of the Kingdom of God.** They were already committed to that way, **and so, were asking for this kind of instruction.** **Jesus was not preaching so much as teaching those who wanted to know.** The crowd was **simply allowed to listen in.**

The situation has not changed much today. Many hear the words of “The Beatitudes” and walk away saying how “nice” they are, but with absolutely no comprehension of their meaning. The teaching is so far from the contemporary patterns of thinking that most who hear simply do not “get it.” I’m not real certain we have any capacity at all in the prevailing culture to understand “blessedness.” However, there are always some who seem to appreciate the “The Beatitudes,” and that gives me confidence that

there is still a small band of disciples ready to examine the Master's teaching. So, friends, let me talk to you, and the others can "listen in."

Matthew writes his Gospel in Greek, and the word he uses for "blessed" is "makarios." Of course, Jesus did not teach in Greek but rather Hebrew, and in Hebrew the word is "asher." It means "happy" and "fortunate" all wrapped into one. It also had a vertical dimension. It means "happy" and "fortunate" under God, since that is the way life is. It is lived by the kind permission of God. Whether we like it or not, or whether we believe it or not is totally irrelevant. The sense of the word may be seen in Psalm 144:15: "How blessed / happy / fortunate the people whose God is the Lord (Adonai)."

So, from the first word we understand the subject matter of these brief aphorisms. They are a series of memorable statements that summarize how we can develop a relationship with God that will result in happiness.

They are progressive. They describe growth. They begin at the beginning and take us along a path which, if we walk it, will make of us the person described in the first Psalm; who is planted by the rivers of water and who brings forth fruit in season, whose leaves do not wither and who prospers in whatever he does. It is not a quick fix. It will not give you an adrenaline surge. It will not even solve all your problems. But, it is the only path to "blessedness."

## **THE FIRST BEATITUDE - POVERTY OF SPIRIT**

Today happiness is sought in some form of self fulfillment. We seek a satisfying self image. We try to actualize the potential self, to bring out the hidden soul. We want to be self assertive, self sufficient, self motivated and self assured. Against that background the first of Jesus' "Beatitudes" seems not only droll but really counterproductive. The reason for the dissonance is not difficult to ascertain. Jesus was not nearly as confident in the competence of the human spirit as we seem to be. He clearly saw the human soul as enslaved to sin and Satan, so that every attempt at self actualization was a giant step backward.

Jesus taught that if you want to be happy you have got to start with a right understanding of the condition of your soul. In relation to God you are poverty stricken. The word "spirit" in the Bible describes the soul in its relationship to God, the source of all life. Because of sin we have in ourselves no standing before God at all, and therefore no access to the resources for happiness. We have a hard time owning up to our spiritual poverty, so we substitute other things to fill the hole in our soul. We go after sex, money, power, social status, you name it.

I heard someone say at one time, "You can tell what God thinks of money by the people he gives it to." I said to my wife at the time that I thought God might perhaps make an exception where we were concerned, but at this point, I doubt it.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus said. Blessed are those who start from the knowledge that they are totally unworthy in the sight of God. Blessed are those who know they have nothing to trade God for happiness. That knowledge is hard to come by. It is easier to excuse our sins and rationalize our failures. It is easier to blame others and claim some platform of power on the basis that we are superior to others in some way, great or small. But Jesus says to us, “If you want to approach the throne of God, if you want to enter the Kingdom, leave all your junk outside.” Come to God as totally unworthy. Come to God because for some unfathomable reason you were invited, but with nothing that would explain the invitation.

The road to happiness starts here. It does not end here. Now, if you are saying to yourself, “This is a bummer, but it is sure to get better,” don’t count on it. Each step will help you move toward God and the joy of the Lord, but they don’t necessarily get easier. Where did we get this idea that spiritual growth was easy? That’s the kind of propaganda they feed us when they try to sell us these exercise machines. And, that’s exactly why most people who buy them find them useful items on which to hang their laundry. Growth is hard work.

Spiritual growth, and the road to real happiness begins with a realization that you are totally unworthy to enter God’s presence and his Kingdom. You need to realize that the blessed are not those who say the words, but those who **ARE** poor in spirit. That will get us started.

## **THE SECOND BEATITUDE - SORROW FOR SIN**

The second “Beatitude” of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount follows logically after the first. Once we have acknowledged our spiritual poverty before God there is no longer an obstacle to repenting for specific sins. Spiritual bankruptcy is a general condition. We admit having nothing to merit an audience with the Almighty. “Mourning” for sin, however, is quite specific. There is no way to be sorry for sin in general.

Mourning for sin, or repentance, means making a life change, adjusting behavior, going another way. That cannot happen in a non-specific way. We must be sorry for a specific sin and determine we are not going to do that anymore, but rather walk in the way of the Lord. If a business man cheats another business man, and has a change of heart, so that he mourns over the sin, he has not truly mourned until he pays up. Zacchaeus not only came down the sycamore tree and entertained Jesus at his home. He paid up on all fraudulent tax collections.

What Jesus says is that if we do repent, God will comfort us. That will be done first by enabling us to change. Sinners are not good at changing direction. Sin comes too naturally. They may want to, because they see the harm they are doing to themselves and others. But, sin is a moral addiction. Jesus teaches that if you will “mourn” God will step in and help. He will “comfort.”

The second thing God will do is forgive. He will enable release from the guilt of that specific sin. People who hold on to the guilt of their sin, even though they profess they have “mourned” over it, have not really experienced the forgiveness of God. That means

their repentance was partial. Either they held out some ground for pride, telling themselves it really wasn't so bad, or they never made

it right with the offended party. They are not comforted. They still carry a part of the guilt. They often say, “I cannot forgive myself.” They cannot forgive themselves because they still blame someone else for their failure. They have not truly mourned, so they are not truly comforted.

The word “sin” means “transgression,” or stepping over the line. Another word for “sin” means “missing the mark.” These are identifiable events. They are what God requires us to mourn over. There are, of course, unconscious sins. But, repentance is exercised where we know where we went wrong. We live in a time where the borders of ethical behavior have been erased and where targets for moral living have been taken down. In this kind of world mourning for sin becomes increasingly difficult, and identifying virtue becomes a search in the fog. However, God is not mocked. He has put in every human heart what Edward Carnell used to call “the judicial sentiment.” We do know, and Jesus says you must mourn to grow. Identify the sin in your life. Make it right, and God will comfort you. Happiness depends on it.

## **THE THIRD BEATITUDE - DEFERENCE**

Once we have attained a true estimate of our moral situation before a holy God, namely poverty; and once we have mourned for our conscious and specific sins we are ready to move on to the third stage of happiness. Jesus teaches us that the “meek will inherit the earth,” or more properly, “the land.” This blessing is a quotation from Psalm 37, a Psalm of David, the great king of Israel. Those gathered on the hillside that day by the Sea of Galilee heard, not the Greek word “gen” but the Hebrew word “eretz.” That is, they heard not the word for the earth in general, but the word used for the land of Israel (Eretz Yishrael). The situation of conquest by the Romans and the Messianic hope of the people places this blessing in the context of power.

Jesus was saying blessed are those who do not seek power but seek service. These are the people to whom God will give the land. He will not give it to those who wish to take it by force. The land is God’s to give, and he will reward only those will serve others. Israel was called to be a servant people, a people called to divine service. They were to take the light of God’s truth to the rest of the world. Israel’s Messiah said of himself, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28).”

Deference is not a characteristic of the spiritually weak. By the time we get to the third beatitude we are beginning to see a person who has been through the growth process of the first two

blessings. They are no longer denying their sin. Neither are they seeking to blame others for it. They have attained a place where their spiritual energy may be directed from rationalizing their guilt to seeing the needs of others. They no longer have to be first, the greatest, the smartest, the most powerful. They know better, and they know who has the power. These people have learned to stand in the place of a servant. They have begun to develop the servant mind.

This is what “turning the other cheek” is about later in this sermon. It is not about justice. We all know what Justice would require. It is about thinking as a servant. It is about stopping long enough to consider the needs of the striker. It is a quick aphorism, a condensed summery statement. It does not cover all the bases. What it does do is remind us that we are so wrapped up in ourselves that turning the other cheek is the very last thing we would consider. We do not think as servants. We think a self centered, power oriented, vengeful sinners.

Jesus tells his disciples that happiness depends on your willingness to defer to others, to think as God thinks, to love the world more than the desire to take vengeance on sin. The Son of Man was sent into the world not to condemn it but to save it (John 3:17). In humans this mode of thinking takes some real growing up. But, Jesus promises a blessing for those who attain it.

## **THE FOURTH BEATITUDE - HUNGER AND THIRST**

Once spiritual growth in an individual has reached the level where a “servant mind” has become reality for them they are ready to proceed to the fourth level of blessing, or happiness. Jesus says in the fourth beatitude, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

“Righteousness” as Jesus talks about it, and as the Bible views it generally, is not a state of morality. It is rather a right relationship with God. There is no claim to merit involved in righteousness as viewed in Jewish and Christian thought. Our relationship with the Almighty is always on the basis of a covenant offered by God which includes forgiveness for sin and expects a life of fellowship with God and obedience to his will. The relationship is not based on this obedience. It is based on the unmerited favor of God. The obedience is then based on the relationship in which we stand.

Once a person has a mind to serve God and mankind he or she enters into the realization that they have no real ability or power to do so. The Apostle Paul describes the condition hypothetically in Romans 7:18. He says, “I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.” Actually, the statement is not so hypothetical. It is only so in terms of the place in the discussion in which Paul makes the statement. He has experienced the resolution of the problem, but he has not yet stated it. He has also experienced the problem.

Jesus talks about “hunger and thirst.” These are states of deprivation. People who are hungry and thirsty are in need. It is a need we probably won’t recognize until we are willing to take on what Paul calls in First Corinthians and other places the “mind of the Messiah.” Until we are ready to be the servants of God we are not aware that we have no empowerment to do so. Once we are ready we hunger and thirst for the relationship with God which will enable us to serve.

I can remember when I was about to graduate from seminary, I went in to talk to Dr. Carl Henry, who was then a good friend, although I have not seen him for some years now. Suddenly as we talked about the future I broke down and sobbed uncontrollably. I believe what was happening was that I was now ready to serve God and the Church as a Pastor. Suddenly, the awareness came upon me that I had no spiritual power to do so. It was frightening.

Shortly after this experience I heard the voice of the Lord of the Church say, “If you hunger and thirst after righteousness, I will take care of the filling.” Being willing is not enough. It is only as God enables through the Holy Spirit that we can carry out the servant role he has promised to bless.

“Blessed are the meek...and blessed are those who hunger and thirst.” The fourth beatitude flows ,from the third in the process of growing up spiritually.

## **THE FIFTH BEATITUDE - MERCY**

The fifth “Beatitude” of Jesus has to do with forgiveness. It is certainly indicative of the difficulty of forgiving that this beatitude is fifth in a progression that indicates a path of spiritual growth. This blessing cannot be experienced until first we have learned humility, repentance, deference, true spiritual hunger and thirst: then, perhaps we are ready to enjoy the experience of being merciful.

Asking forgiveness came early in the sequence. It is covered in beatitude two. Giving forgiveness is only possible when we have learned righteousness. That is, when we have learned to draw upon the resources of God’s character in close fellowship; when we have begun to act a “public servants;” when we have finally begun to put others needs in front of our own; then we might begin to forgive.

Receiving forgiveness and giving forgiveness are always linked together in the teaching of Jesus. The most obvious place is in his teaching on prayer. The model prayer states, “Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors.” In the parable of the “Unmerciful Servant” the servant begs the King’s forgiveness for a debt which today would equal several million dollars. The King grants his petition. Later he learns this same servant will not forgive a fellow servant a debt of a few dollars. The King calls him back and had him thrown into jail. The dynamic of

repentance and forgiveness are complex. There is such a thing as incomplete repentance and incomplete forgiveness. However, in general, if we have not experienced true repentance and true forgiveness we will not be able to forgive. It is in the receiving of grace that we learn to be gracious.

True forgiveness often means taking on ourselves the consequences and the pain of the sin we are forgiving. When Jesus teaches his followers that when someone takes your coat, give him your sweater as well (Matthew 5:40), or when someone forces you to carry their burden a mile along the road, volunteer to carry it two miles, the one who forgives is going to be sore and cold. We are not talking about justice here, but about living as a servant, living redemptively. Such decisions are personal. I can decide to bear the burden. It is my choice. I cannot make the choice for someone else. Freeing a murderer because we hope he has learned his lesson is not forgiveness, it is injustice. I cannot take that burden upon myself.

When God forgives he promises that the sin will not be brought up again, will not condition any future action, will not be kept in reserve, just in case it happens again. He expects the same of us when we forgive. Forgiveness is not only difficult. it takes great discernment. It needs to be able to identify true repentance, so that the cycle of forgiveness can be complete.

This is why it comes in the middle of the “Beatitudes” and not at the beginning. We must know what it is because we have received it. Then we may be ready to give it.

## THE SIXTH BEATITUDE - PURITY

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” This is beatitude six in the opening statement of Jesus in the “Sermon on the Mount.” The language is a bit strange to us because we immediately think in terms of moral record keeping. This type of thinking is also why we write this one off so quickly, since we know we are not, and our guilt drives us to deny that anyone could be, since we are as good as anyone else.

Of course this is not what “pure in heart” means, since God knows better than we do there are no morally perfect people. “Pure in heart” refers to focus in life. It refers to what is important to people. God pronounces a blessing upon those who achieve a “single eye.” The Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, “But **ONE THING** I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Jesus the Messiah.” This is a pure heart.

Other expressions are used in the Bible to communicate the same thing. King David is called by God, “A man after God’s own heart.” He was so imperfect, but Psalm 42:1 expresses the condition of his heart. “As a deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.” Jesus talks about “the single eye” later in the “Sermon on the Mount.” “A good eye” and “a bad eye” were expressions used by the religious community of Jesus’ time to express the ideas of generous and stingy. Jesus says you can’t have a double focus; you can’t have two masters. Either you love money or you love God, but you can’t love both.

The pure in heart love God. In the parable of the “Sower” Jesus talks about four kinds of human hearts. Some hearts are so hard that a word from God just sits there and is eaten by the birds. Other hearts are shallow. The word of God has no room to take root. Other hearts are so full of junk that the word of God may take root, but is soon choked out. The only heart that bears the fruit of the seed of the word is the heart that is pure. It is kept clean and pure for the nurturing of the word of God.

The sixth beatitude talks about the blessing reserved for those who have pure hearts. They will see God because they do not allow any soul junk to obscure their vision. They are like my wife’s flower beds. They are kept for flowers. The weed have to go, because they prevent the joy of seeing the flowers bloom bright and strong and beautiful. It takes work to root out the weeds, to keep a pure heart. But God promises strength for the task and the joy of seeing his nature clearly as the reward. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

## **THE SEVENTH BEATITUDE - PEACEMAKING**

Peacemaking is a dangerous business. Jesus taught that it would bring happiness to the peacemaker because it would reflect the character of God. “Son” in the Bible is used to denote “likeness” of character more often than the generative sense of the term. When we are “sons of God” we are like God, even as when we are “sons of the Devil” we are like the Devil. Happiness comes to those who seek God with a pure heart and a focused mind and, thus, become like God. These are the “peacemakers.”

It is still a dangerous activity from a human point of view. Jesus, who was called **THE** “Son of God” came into the world to make peace. This was the promise of Bethlehem. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men.” It does not take much thought to realize that the mission cost him his life from a human point of view. The danger lies in that the peacemaker positions himself between two opposing parties, each trying to destroy the other.

In the case of Jesus, he placed himself between the requirements of divine justice and the benevolence of divine love. In bringing the two together the cross became the Alter of Sacrifice in a new economy of God’s redemptive process for creation.

Peacemaking for ordinary people is not nearly so profound, but it is just as dangerous. Yisak Rabin, and the world along with him,

discovered the perilous place of the peacemaker. The target of hatred quickly becomes the peacemaker when healing is attempted. The peacemaker does not take sides. His attempt is not to win, but to reconcile; not to experience victory but to bring concord. Conflict managers talk about “win - loose” situation and “win - win” situations. The usual response in human conflicts is to take sides; to take on someone else’s offense and help in the war. We hope we can defeat the enemy and experience victory. Jesus taught peacemaking. But, notice, it comes seventh in his list of eight “Beatitudes.” It is a dangerous business.

Peacemaking bring to mind Christmas, no matter what the time of year. Peace between God and man is God’s gift. We could do nothing to bring it about. But, we can be godly. We can seek to be like God. We can, in the Spirit of God, seek to bring peace to people in conflict. We ought never to do it without an instructed realism. Sinful humanity loves to hate. To act as a peacemaker we must put ourselves in harm’s way. This is why most people shy away from “getting involved.” But, for those who take the rewards of peacemaking seriously, the “Christmas” effort is made.

There is a focus on world peace in our time. Most who talk about it have little concept of what is involved in the process of getting right with God and each other. However, some are always open to learn. It is worth the effort, and there is a promise of blessing.

## **THE EIGHTH BEATITUDE - PERSECUTION**

Insult and persecution are the last happiness Jesus mentions in the “Beatitudes.” Remember, the Rabbi of Nazareth is outlining a life style for Kingdom people. As we said in the beginning of this series, there is little here that will appeal to men and women of the world. It is humorous when people of unbelief say glibly that they believe in the “Golden Rule” and the “Beatitudes.” In this hedonistic self centered age the “Beatitudes” have about as much attraction as a dart in the ear. People who talk about the teaching of Jesus as commending “niceness” simply haven’t read the Bible for a while.

Persecution follows peacemaking. It is unusually the consequence of trying to bring together sides in conflict when the people involved would rather hate each other. But there is a wider dimension, a theological dimension, to which Jesus attaches holiness. In Revelation, chapter 12, the battle between God and Satan is broadly presented in symbolic language. The issue at hand is the salvation of the world and its people; the restoration of creation to its intended blessedness. Satan tries to stop the process. He first tries to destroy Israel, the instrument of God’s saving activity. When that fails he seeks to devour the child of Israel, the Messianic King. He fails again. Then he declares war on the Kingdom people. God takes care of them so that the victory cry is heard, “Now have come the salvation and the power and kingdom of our God, and the authority of the Messiah.”

The persecuted are happy because they have the Kingdom. God rules in their lives, and will, in the future rule the whole earth. “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever (Revelation 11:15).” So, when listening to Handel’s “Messiah” be happy if you are a member of the Kingdom. But, don’t be naive. The enemy is not yet in his place. He still roams the earth seeking those he may devour.

When Jesus was born the angels, shepherds, Mary and Joseph all rejoiced. Herod, inflamed by anger and hatred of any sovereignty but his own attacked. Persecution comes as the final blessing because it represents a full grown commitment to the Kingdom way. The Apostle John puts it this way in the Revelation: “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death (12:11).” Not everyone celebrates the Kingdom of God and the coming of the Messiah at Christmas or at any other time. Let it be known that you really do, and you may be introduced to the eighth blessing.

Of course, if you are persecuted for being an obnoxious self righteous and religiously arrogant Christian you do not qualify for this blessing. But, if the insult comes in response to righteousness and the lifting up of the name of God and his Messiah the blessing is yours. Rejoice and be glad.

**AMEN**