

# The Sermon on the Mount:

## The Beatitudes

### BACKGROUND

- In the beatitudes Matthew makes use of “divine passive” used in Jewish literature. For instance, in 5:5’s “they will be comforted”, Matthew is saying *God* will comfort those who mourn.
- The beatitude was a standard OT literary form often phrased like “It will go well with the one who... for that one shall receive...”<sup>1</sup>. Other beatitudes include:

“Blessed are all who take refuge in him.” (Ps 2:12)

“Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven” (Ps 32:1)

“Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust, who does not look to the proud” (Ps 40:4)

“Blessed is he who has regard for the weak; the LORD delivers him in times of trouble.” (Ps 41:1)

“Blessed is the man you discipline, O LORD, the man you teach from your law; you grant him relief from days of trouble” (Ps 94:12-13)

“Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in his ways. You will eat the fruit of your labor; blessings and prosperity will be yours” (Ps 128:1-2)

“Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the LORD.” (Prov 8:34-35)

“But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream.” (Jer 17:7-8)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *The poor*: “The poor, God’s poor, were already a clearly defined group in the OT, and Matthew will have been correct to translate ‘poor in spirit.’ For ‘the poor’ were not so much the poverty stricken as the pious who—partly because they were needy, downtrodden, oppressed or in other ways afflicted—had put their faith and hope in God” (Stott, 32). So we read in Isa 66:2, “All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word.”
  - a. We increase psychological well-being by focusing on what we can control. At the same time, we grow as Christians by focusing on our spiritual helplessness and dependence on God. Aren’t these at odds?
  - b. Would you characterize the Jesus of the Gospels as spiritually poor? How about the risen Lord?<sup>2</sup> Is it God’s plan for us to spend eternity spiritually poor, or is this the attitude we need *now* in order to become more like Christ?

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<sup>1</sup> *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Eerdman’s (1999), 167.

- c. What times in your life have you felt most poverty of spirit? How can you cultivate this? Is it better to concentrate on your smallness or God's bigness?
2. *The meek*: This beatitude echoes Ps 37:11. Read Ps 37:1-11. Who are the meek in Ps 37? Now Col 3:12 (here "gentleness"); 1 Peter 3:15-17 (here too); James 1:19-21 (here "*humbly* accept"). What does it mean to be meek? What person *aside* from Jesus best embodies this characteristic?
3. *Those who mourn*: This beatitude uses the vocabulary of Isaiah 61:2-3. Read all of Isa 61. Who was Isaiah consoling, and in what did that consolation consist? What light does *this* passage shed on the who, what, why and when of the beatitudes?
4. John Stott writes,

The beatitudes set forth the balanced and variegated character of the Christian people. These are not eight separate and distinct groups of disciples, some of whom are meek, while others are merciful and yet others are called upon to endure persecution. They are rather eight qualities of the same group who at one and the same time are meek and merciful, poor in spirit and pure in heart, mourning and hungry, peacemakers and persecuted... All these qualities are to characterize all his followers. Just as the ninefold fruit of the Spirit which Paul lists [Gal 5:22-23] is to ripen in every Christian character, so the eight beatitudes which Christ speaks describe his ideal for every citizen of God's kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

- a. If you were given only these criteria to go on, whom would you identify among modern Americans as Jesus' disciples? Do they describe us?
- b. Are these intrinsic qualities or temporary conditions? Are they attributes we experience, or are they conferred upon us by God? Do the beatitudes describe something you *are* or something you *do*, or something you are given? Are these things you pursue in order to become more blessed?
- c. The fruit of the Spirit from Galatians are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." These are understood to increase as we become more Christlike. Is the same true of the qualities commended by the beatitudes: poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, hunger for righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, peaceability, and being persecuted?
5. Much hangs on the word "blessed", the Greek *makarios*, which has this healthy range of meanings: "favored, blessed, fortunate, happy, privileged" (BDAG)<sup>4</sup>. Michael Green argues in favor of "happy":

The Beatitudes come like a bolt out of the blue for any who think of religion as a sad and miserable affair. Maybe 'religion' is. But the kingdom of God is quite different. In participating, we are the way God meant us to be, and so it is inevitably the happy life. And that is what *Blessed* means: made happy by God. It is as if Jesus is saying that life in the kingdom with him is a life of profound joy, a joy that no person can take away. And this blessedness is not reserved for some

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<sup>2</sup> Or the Suffering Servant (Isa 42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-52:12)! In fact, see if you can't find *each* of the qualities in the beatitudes in the Servant Songs

<sup>3</sup> *Christian Counter-Culture*, IVP (1978), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Those translations which use "happy" include the Common English Bible, the J. B. Phillips, and the Good News.

nebulous future. It is now! It is the mark of those who have really surrendered to the King and tasted his grace, although of course there is a future to rejoice in too.<sup>5</sup>

Other NT passages where *makarios* is used in a grammatically similar way include:

“*Makarios* that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns” (Mt 24:46)

“*Makarios* is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished” (Lk 1:45)

“*Makarios* are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. *Makarios* are you who weep now, for you will laugh” (Lk 6:21)

“*Makarios* are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (Jn 20:29)

“*Makarios* are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven” (Mt 16:17)

“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be *makarios*” (Lk 14:13)

The antecedents of the beatitudes also give clues as to the intended meaning of *makarios*:

For theirs in the kingdom of heaven

For they will be comforted

For they will inherit the earth

For they will be filled

For they will receive mercy

For they will see God

For they will be called children of God

For theirs is the kingdom of heaven

For your reward is great in heaven

If you only had these phrases and verses to go on, and no prior knowledge, what words would you use to translate *makarios*? How many of these things are *now*, and how many are only when the kingdom comes in its fullness? How does that affect your translation?

6. Carson writes of *makarios*,

...the word ‘beatitude’ is a rough transliteration of the Latin *beatus*... Both ‘beatitude’ and ‘macarism’ are transliterations of foreign words which can best be translated ‘blessed.’ Although some modern translations prefer ‘happy’ to ‘blessed’, it is a poor exchange. Those who are blessed will generally be profoundly happy; but blessedness cannot be reduced to happiness. In the Scriptures, man can bless God and God can bless man. This duality gives us a clue just what is meant. To be ‘blessed’ means, fundamentally, to be approved, to find approval. When a man blessed God, he is approving God. Of course, he is not doing this in some condescending manner,

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<sup>5</sup> *The Message of Matthew*, IVP (2000), 89-90. Keener prefers “‘Fortunate’ or ‘it will be well with’”: “In this context Jesus’ beatitudes mean that it will ultimately be well with those who seek first God’s kingdom”.

but rather he is eulogizing God, praising God. When God blesses man, he is approving man; and that is always an act of condescension.<sup>6</sup>

What light does this shed on the beatitudes? What does it mean for our small group to be “approved” of God?

7. Which of the qualities described in the beatitudes do you most resonate with? Which, if any, do you feel you need to cultivate? How might you do that?
8. What can you discern in the beatitudes about the condition and concerns of Jesus’—or Matthew’s—audience?



*Fun quote:* “In following him [the disciples] have lost even their own selves, and everything that could make them rich. Now they are poor—so inexperienced, so stupid, that they have no other hope but him who called them.” —Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 120

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<sup>6</sup> *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World*, Baker (2004), 16. Stott: “...it is seriously misleading to render *makarios* ‘happy’. For happiness is a subjective state, whereas Jesus is making an objective judgment about these people. He is declaring not what they may feel like (‘happy’), but what God things of them and what on that account they are: they are ‘blessed’” (p. 33).