

Matthew 5:1-12

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. And 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 satisfied.

"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.

"Blessed are you when men reviled you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you."

We have to answer the questions

What are these beatitudes?

Do they spell out conditions we must meet in order to inherit eternal life?

Do they celebrate the power of God in the life of the disciples?

Could it be both?

How do we know?

Let's begin today by with our lens open more widely than just the beatitudes. Then we will narrow it down to the beatitudes themselves.

The Structure of Matthew

Notice Matthew 4:23.

It is a summary statement of Jesus' earthly ministry:

"And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people."

- Preach: Communicating the Coming Kingdom
- Teach: Communicate the Way of the Kingdom
- Healing: Demonstrate the Purpose and Power of the Kingdom by Healing the Sick

One way to restate that verse would be to say that Jesus made it his ministry to preach the coming of the kingdom, teach the way of the kingdom, and demonstrate the purpose and power of the kingdom by healing the sick. Preaching, teaching, and healing.

Now turn to Matthew 9:35. Almost verbatim we find the same summary: "And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity."

Then when we look to see what is sandwiched between these two summary descriptions of Jesus' ministry, what we see are two major sections: chapters 5–7 are a collection of Jesus' teaching called the Sermon on the Mount; and chapters 8 and 9 are a collection of stories mainly about his healing ministry. So what it appears we have is a five chapter unit designed by Matthew to present us first with some typical teaching of the Lord concerning the way of the kingdom, and second with some typical healings and miracles to demonstrate the power of the kingdom.

The value of seeing this is that it warns us against treating any little piece of this section in isolation. Matthew is the writer here and he is putting his material together in a particular way. He is the inspired apostle, and we should care about how he chose to put things together. That is the way he gets across his meaning.

The Jesus Who Teaches and Heals

For example, one thing we can say right off the bat is that you can't have the Jesus of the Sermon of the Mount without the Jesus who cleansed the leper, and healed the centurion's servant, and stilled the storm, and cast out demons. The writer who gives us the one, gives us the other, and it is arbitrary to do what some modern folk try to do: namely, say that they admire the ethical teacher of the Sermon on the

Mount but they don't want to get involved with the spooky supernatural Person who stills storms and casts out demons.

Or for some the opposite temptation may overcome them. They may have a charismatic fascination with the miracles of Jesus, but when it comes to reckoning with the One who said, "Don't call your brother a fool, don't lust, don't get divorced, don't swear, don't return evil for evil, love your enemy"—well, they like the miracle worker who heals their diseases, but this radical intruder into their personal lifestyle, they are not so interested in him.

Matthew's point is that the Lord who teaches like this in the Sermon on the Mount is the same Lord who calls us to follow him through life and depend upon his power. His personal work and power are inseparable from his teaching. In fact we will see right away that this is clear even in the beatitudes.

The Crowds and the Disciples

So let's go to Matthew 5:1ff.

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them saying . . .

The audience is probably two concentric circles: the inner circle of the disciples, and the outer circle of the "crowds." It says in verse 1 that he taught his disciples. But look at the end of the sermon in Matthew 7:28,

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

So it is clear that the crowds were listening and that Jesus wanted them to listen even though the sermon is primarily addressed to professing disciples. Let me mention here that this is the way our Sunday services at Bethlehem are conceived. Primarily the word is prepared to feed and strengthen and inspire the worship and life of God's people. But we pray that more and more there will be the curious, the onlookers, the skeptical, the searchers, the doubters who come to Bethlehem the way the crowds gathered in behind the disciples on the mount. We believe that the Spirit-anointed, authoritative preaching of the Word of God has a peculiar power to awaken unbelievers to the truth and beauty of Christ—even when it is addressed primarily to disciples. So I would urge you to feel free to invite any and every one to our Sunday services at Bethlehem. It is precisely the things our Lord has to say to US that can awaken desire in others to come to Christ.

The Sermon Begins

So the sermon begins with the disciples gathered at the feet of Jesus and with the crowds listening in.

How will the Lord begin? He begins by pronouncing a certain kind of person fortunate. We call these pronouncements "beatitudes" from the Latin word for happiness or blessedness. Let's see how the whole group is put together.

Eight Beatitudes, One Unit

There are eight beatitudes worded in the same way. Verse 11 could be viewed as a ninth one, but it is really an expansion of verse 10 and is worded differently from the others. It says, "Blessed are you when men revile you." None of the others say, "Blessed are you." It is probably an expansion of verse 10, which says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake." The reviling in verse 11 is a specific instance of the persecution in verse 10.

You can see that the eight beatitudes of verses 3–10 are a unit when you look at the first and the eighth. Notice the promise of the first beatitude in verse 3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And notice the promise of the eighth beatitude in verse 10: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Both of them have the identical promise, "For theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

But the other six beatitudes sandwiched between these two are all different. Verse 4: "For they shall be comforted." Verse 5: "For they shall inherit the earth." Verse 6: "For they shall be satisfied." Verse 7: "For they shall obtain mercy." Verse 8: "For they shall see God." Verse 9: "For they shall be called the sons of God."

Future Promises Sandwiched by Present Assurance

Notice that all of these are promises for the future. "They shall be comforted . . . They shall inherit the earth . . . They shall be satisfied . . ." And so on. But the promise of the first and last beatitude in verses 3 and 10 seems to relate to the present: the disciples are assured that "theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Now what is the meaning of this pattern? I think there are at least two implications.

The Blessings of the Kingdom

First, by sandwiching six promises in between two assurances that such people have the kingdom of heaven, I think Jesus means to tell us that these six promises are blessings of the kingdom. In other words, these six things are what you can count on when you are a part of God's kingdom. This is what the kingdom brings: comfort,

earth ownership, satisfied righteousness, mercy, a vision of God, and the awesome title, son of God. You don't have to pick and choose among these promises. They all belong to the kingdom. That is the first implication I see in the fact that Jesus begins with the assurance, "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven," and ends with the assurance, "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven," with six promises sandwiched in between.

A Present yet Future Kingdom

The other implication of this pattern comes from the fact that the first and last assurances are present tense, and the six in the middle are future. "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven" in verses 3 and 10. But, "They shall be comforted . . . They shall inherit the earth . . ." and so on in verses 4–9. I think this is Jesus' way of saying that in some sense the kingdom of heaven is present with the disciples now ("Theirs is the kingdom of heaven") but that the full blessings of the kingdom will have to wait for the age to come ("They shall inherit the earth").

Another way to put it is that Jesus has brought the kingdom of heaven to earth in his own kingly power and fellowship, and we can enjoy foretastes of it here and now; but the full experience of the life of the kingdom will have to wait for the age to come.

You can see exactly what this means right here in the beatitudes.

Being Comforted

Take several examples. Verse 4 says that those who mourn will one day be comforted. As Revelation 21:4 says, "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more." But look at verses 11 and 12: "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven." In other words, even though the final reward of comfort is kept for us in heaven, we can now rejoice even in the midst of suffering. And is not this joy a foretaste of the promised comfort? There is no joy without some element of comfort.

Obtaining Mercy

Or consider verse 7: It promises, "They shall obtain mercy." But in the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:23–35 the king says to the wicked servant, "And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" In other words, Jesus teaches that we do not merely wait for the age to come to receive mercy. It has come in Jesus. We taste it here and now in forgiveness of sins and innumerable blessings of this life.

Being Called Sons of God

Or consider verse 9. It promises, "They shall be called sons of God." As Romans 8:23 says, "We groan inwardly as we wait for the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." So the full benefits of being sons of God await the resurrection. But look at verse 16: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see you good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." God is already our Father! We are already sons! That is, we have a foretaste of sonship now.

The point of these three examples is that the kingdom of heaven is both present and future. We have foretastes of the reign of God now, but we will experience vastly more in the future. I think this is why verses 3 and 10 assure us that "theirs is the kingdom of heaven," but verses 4–9 promise that the kingdom blessings are still in the future. It is both.

One of the Most Important Lessons

And this is one of the most important things you can learn about the Christian faith. Without this insight the Sermon on the Mount simply cannot be understood. For example, what will you make of verse 7 without this insight that the kingdom blessings of God's mercy are both present and future? It says, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy." Does this mean that God withholds his mercy until the future day of reckoning and waits to see if we will be merciful enough to earn his mercy? That is what it looks like it says.

But if you know the gospel of the kingdom (4:23; 24:14), that is, if you know the good news that the kingdom has already come and is now at work like a dragnet gathering in a people for the kingdom (13:47–50)—if you know that the power of the kingdom is already present as well as future, then you will know that our becoming merciful is (right now!) a work of God's kingly mercy. That is the point of Matthew 18:33—The king said "And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" God's prior mercy enables us to be merciful. The powerful mercy of the kingdom has already come in Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

God is not just waiting like a Judge at the end of the age to see whether or not we will be able to earn his mercy then by showing mercy now. God is not merely waiting, he is casting the net of mercy into the sea of the world and dragging people to life and hope and joy and mercy (13:47–50). "No one can come to me unless the Father draws him," Jesus said (John 6:44). "No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father" (John 6:65).

The Mercy of the Kingdom Already in the World

The mercy of the kingdom is in the world drawing people to Christ. The mercy of the

kingdom is in the world opening people's eyes to Christ. Do you remember what Jesus said to Peter when Peter confessed him to be the Messiah? "Blessed are you Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 16:17). God is not waiting to see if Peter will recognize Jesus as the Messiah. He opened his eyes. Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you Simon! God has!

You did not choose him first; he chose you (John 15:16). You did not come to him first; he drew you (John 6:44). You did not recognize Christ first; God opened your eyes (Matthew 6:17). And all this is mercy, mercy, mercy! "It is not of him who wills or runs but of God who has MERCY" (Romans 9:16).

Try to grasp this and make it part of your very being. Many passages of Scripture teach that God will show mercy on us in the future if we live a certain way now. Many other passages of Scripture teach that God has already shown us mercy, enabling us to live in a certain way now. These are not inconsistent. This is the very fabric of biblical life. We are born anew by the mercy of God. We are sanctified by the mercy of God. And when we get to the judgment seat of God, he will say, "You are still a sinner. But I see in your life the distinguishing fruit of my Son's mercy. Your mercy on others is the evidence of his mercy in you. And for his sake I now show you mercy again. Come, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Seeing the Beatitudes for What They Are

Unless you see the beatitudes as part of this biblical fabric, you will not be able to understand them for what they are. They are an announcement of how fortunate people are who already possess, as it were, the power of the kingdom. You might say: "Blessed! Blessed! And fortunate are you who have the kingdom power at work within you, for you will inherit the kingdom with all its infinite pleasures forever and ever." The beatitudes are announcements that people like this are very blessed, very fortunate.

But that is not all. The beatitudes also contain an implicit invitation to become this kind of person. The disciples sit at Jesus' feet and hear his words as congratulations. "O how fortunate you are, my dear brothers! O how fortunate you are to be chosen of God, to have your eyes opened, to be drawn to the Savior, to be poor and mourning and meek and hungry and merciful and pure and peaceable! Rejoice! Rejoice and give thanks, my beloved disciples, that you are this kind of person, for it is not your own doing! It is the reign of God in your life." So the disciples hear the beatitudes as words of celebration about the work of God in their lives.

But what about the crowds standing behind the disciples? How do they hear these words of congratulations? How should they hear them, if they are not poor in spirit, if they are not mourning or meek or hungry for righteousness or merciful or pure or peaceable? What do these words mean for them? They are certainly not congratulations. You can't congratulate a guest on his wedding garment if he doesn't have it on (Matthew 22:11–14).

What then? If you see people being welcomed to a feast with a certain garment on, don't the words of welcome stir you up to go get a garment like that? And if you see people being promised the blessings of eternal life because they are poor in spirit and mourning and meek and hungry for righteousness and merciful and pure and peaceable, don't those words of promise beckon you to become that kind of person? Indeed, don't they beget in you the seeds of those very flowers? Perhaps not. But for some they do. And if they don't in you, O, how you should pray that God would not leave you in such a hard and impenitent condition.

So the beatitudes are words of celebration for disciples—people who have been awakened by the present power of the age to come. And they are words of invitation for the crowds—the people who come to worship out of tradition or curiosity or skepticism. And for some they are words of transformation—by the power and mercy of God.

What Are They for You?

Next week we begin with the best news a hopeless sinner could ever hear: the condition we must meet in order to have any dealings with God is spiritual bankruptcy. It is the easiest—and hardest—condition of all. What could be easier than having an empty hand? Unless you are clutching a \$1,000 bill, or a personal "bill of rights"?