

The Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:3-12)

The word “*beatitude*” comes from the Latin word *beatus*, which means, “*blessed*.” Blessed means more than “*happy*.” Those who mourn are not happy, but they are blessed. Each of the sentences that begins with “*blessed are*” is followed by the Gospel statement, introduced by “*For*.” The first eight are in the third person, and, as the ninth is in the second person, it is best regarded as an expansion of the eighth one. In the parallel in Luke 6, there are also eight statements, four beginning with “*Blessed*”, and four beginning with “*Woe*.”

The first one, “*Blessed are those who are poor in spirit! For theirs is the kingdom of heaven*”, ends with “*the kingdom of heaven*” as does also the eighth one. Jesus’ teaching was summed up in this theme. The kingdom was inseparable from Himself as the King, and His death and resurrection made the kingdom of heaven an accomplished reality. Jesus began His preaching with “*The kingdom of God is near*.” When He was present, the kingdom of God was present with human beings. He and His kingdom are still present with us through His Word and Sacraments.

The Greek word for “*poor*” has, as its background, two Hebrews words, which between them carry the meanings of “*poor*”, “*afflicted*”, and “*humble*.” The basic idea is that a beggar has nothing of his own on which to base any demand or claim. Those who are in the kingdom are receivers, and depend desperately on the divine Giver, as beggars rely on human givers. “*In spirit*” means that this poverty is not lack of money and property, but lack of righteousness in their lives on which they could claim a good standing with God. New-age literature is full of terms like “*self-visualisation*”, “*self-realisation*”, and even “*self-love*.” The follower of Jesus has said farewell to himself. Jesus matters, not self. He who saves himself, his life, or his soul loses himself, his life, or his soul.

The second, “*Blessed are those who mourn! For they will be comforted*”, embraces all who regret their sins, lament the sad state of affairs in the church, and are unhappy about everything in this world, which is spoilt by the two great evils, sin, and death. Often Jewish people used a passive formulation like “*they will be comforted*” to imply God as the unexpressed agent. The meaning is, “*God will comfort them*.” Neither God the Father nor Jesus Christ are mentioned directly in the beatitudes, but we misunderstand the beatitudes if we do not see them there. In all the beatitudes, Jesus was indirectly pointing people to Himself. Isaiah 61, which prophesied what the promised Messiah would do, began with a promise that He would bring good news to the afflicted and ended with the promise that He would comfort all who mourn (61:1-2).

The third, “*Blessed are the meek! For they will inherit the earth*”, is the very opposite of the general attitude of people of the world. Those who are pushy and self-assertive are thought to be the ones who get ahead. The truth that the meek are successful is true in aspects of ordinary life. For example, the aggressive motorist is more likely to have an accident, and the one who slackens off is more likely to survive. There is a close relationship between those who are poor and those who are meek. Meek people are people who wait. Jesus had come to usher in a new age of fulfilment. As Israelites looked on the land of Canaan as their inheritance, those who meekly look to Christ’s grace alone will inherit the new heaven and earth, the New Jerusalem, for which they wait, in hope.

In the fourth, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness! For they will be filled*”, it is good to remember that people who are hungry and thirsty do not have what they want, but would like to have it. Believers know that their lives are not righteous, but they would like to follow God’s commands perfectly. They will be filled, because, through faith in Jesus’ atonement by His blood, His obedience is credited to them. God reckons to them what they lack and desire. What God credits to them fully without cost becomes the motive for striving after righteousness in their lives as well, in response.

The first four beatitudes describe people who wait expectantly and desperately for God. The next four describe attitudes of Jesus’ disciples. They have these attitudes because of what God does for them.

The fifth, “*Blessed are those who are merciful! For they will be treated mercifully*”, reminds us about the forgiveness for which we pray in the Lord’s Prayer. Because God forgives us in Christ, we gladly forgive each other. As God Himself, in Christ, has paid the cost of His strict justice, so that He is merciful without flouting His justice, Jesus’ followers freely forgive those who have harmed them. Their mercy is motivated, inspired, and empowered by God’s mercy to them.

The sixth, “*Blessed are the pure in heart! For they will see God*” refers to people who have no secondary, deceitful, or double agendas. They are sincere, frank, and single-minded. God is completely pure. No one has ever seen the Father. Jesus, who knows the Father intimately, and has revealed Him, has come so that all the consequences of the fall into sin may be reversed, and that believers may see Jesus, be like Him in the life to come, and have the image of God restored in them. Their likeness to God will be fully restored through Jesus, who is the image of the invisible God in His human nature, and they will see the Father Himself in glory.

The seventh, “*Blessed are those who make peace! For they will be called ‘the children of God’*”, reminds us that the same truth of justification through faith may also be expressed in other ways. One is the reconciliation of sinners with God, or peace with Him, and the other is being reborn, or adopted, as God’s dear children. The peace of this world is secured and maintained as secular governments make controlled use of force. The Word of the Gospel is powerful in a different way. Jesus won through apparent defeat on the cross. The Gospel is a Word of peace. When Jesus was born, angels sang, “*Peace on earth*”, and Jesus’ first words to His disciples after He rose from the death were, “*Peace to you!*” As God in grace has reconciled sinful people to Himself in Jesus Christ, those who receive His peace strive for peace in all human relationships.

The eighth, “*Blessed are those who have been persecuted because of righteousness! For theirs is the kingdom of*

heaven”, has the same Gospel promise as the first, the kingdom of heaven. Jews often moved the danger of taking God’s name in vain one step further away by trying to avoid using the name of God as much as possible, through alternative formulations. “*The kingdom of heaven*”, the regular expression in Matthew, means the same as “*the kingdom of God*” in Mark, Luke, and John. Elsewhere Jesus said, about infants and those who are like them, “*the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.*” Infants have everything done for them, and cannot assert themselves except to cry in their need. When followers of Jesus are given a hard time by those who hate and oppose the Gospel of Christ, the disciples do not win their cause by retaliation, self-defence, or self-assertion. They know that they can suffer. In doing so, they know that God will more than compensate them. The kingdom of God and His righteousness are all that matter. They consign all revenge to God, for Him to deal with in His good time. The followers of Jesus have taken up their crosses, as Jesus took up His, for the sake of having the title of King at His cross.

The addition, “*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you, because of Me! Rejoice and be very glad! For your reward in heaven is great. For in this way people persecuted the prophets who were before you*”, explains what “*for righteousness sake*” may imply, being wrongfully criticised, mocked, and falsely accused. The joy that compensates Jesus’ followers will be beyond any happiness that this world can provide. God’s “*reward*” is one of pure grace, unearned. Christians readily endure persecution for righteousness’ sake because they know that God’s gracious gift of righteousness is truly great, and no one can out-give His generosity.

We cannot read the beatitudes from five to the end without seeing our Lord Himself behind the veil. He was merciful, pure in heart, and the Bringer of peace, and He was persecuted when He was innocent. His own attitude in word and deed calls us to be like Him.