

# Beatitudes: Basking in the Applause of Heaven

## Matthew 5:3

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Our *Seeking the Kingdom* series in Matthew brings us to one of the most famous passages of Scripture in the Bible. We are going to look for a few weeks at what is called The Sermon on the Mount. What is the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount? What about those “beatitudes”? Why is it the poor in Spirit who get the kingdom of God?

### Why is it Called *The Sermon on the Mount*?

*"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."* (Matthew 5:1-2 ESV)

Is it obvious where the name came from? His public ministry had begun. His teaching and healing ministry produced incredible crowds from everywhere. He sees the massive crowds and goes up a mountain. Tradition says that this sermon was delivered on the large hills northeast of the Sea of Galilee. If we do another Israel trip, maybe you can go and see the area. These hills are high but don't think Grand Tetons. He sat down, as was the practice of teachers then. The hillside provides a natural acoustic amphitheater.

### What is the Message/Purpose of *The Sermon on the Mount*?

This is actually a hotly debated question and there is so much literature on *The Sermon on the Mount* it's hard to get your head around it. Everyone claims *The Sermon on the Mount*. The pacifists love it. The political left and right quote it. Gandhi used it. Martin Luther King Jr. utilized it. Even within conservative theological circles there is debate. One school of thought says it doesn't apply to us; it's the future kingdom. Others apply it now.

So what is it? *The Sermon on the Mount* describes the inner and outer life of the citizen of the kingdom of God. It speaks presently by challenging citizens in the kingdom to live today like this. It also speaks with vision of what life will be like when God's kingdom is fully here someday. It's like a doctor who says, you will feel better immediately if you stop smoking AND someday you will feel even better. It's a word for today and tomorrow. It's already; not yet, just like the kingdom.

So the definitive message about the kingdom has this today and tomorrow vibe. If we read it with too much of today we get discouraged because our lives fail to measure up. If we read it with too much tomorrow we fail to let its message challenge and change us today. The reason that it is so difficult to understand is that it describes a kind of life that is so radically different from the world we live in. It's like you or me trying to explain what it's like to breathe air to a fish. The fish thinks, *That sounds crazy. You don't breathe water? No, we get our oxygen from a different source—the air around us.*

In the analogy, we are the fish and Jesus is explaining what it's like to breathe the clean, pure, and glorious air of the kingdom of God. To live in the sunshine. To live under the rule and reign of God. To live in God's kingdom.

*The Sermon on the Mount* describes a life free from violence, hatred, lust, and pride. It further describes a kind of love we don't really understand—loving your enemy. Doing good

to people who don't do good to you. Promise keeping. Generosity. Daily dependence on God instead of self. Doing for others what you wish they would do for you. No wonder when he was done, this was the response: *"And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching."* (Matthew 7:28)

They were like fish out of water; they could hardly take it. What he was describing was so radical that even highly religious people like the culture of the first century Jews, couldn't handle it. It is just as radical today.

### **What is a "Beatitude"?**

They are called beatitudes from the Latin word for "blessing." The literary style is found in the Old Testament and New Testament, but Matthew's are surely the most well-known. A beatitude is a form of teaching that uses a short, easy-to-remember style that begins with a blessing, designates a required condition, and then gives a promise—generally for the future but not always.

Matthew lists eight promises. Two are for the present. Six are for the future.

*"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 receive 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 5:3-10)

#### **Condition**

*Poor in Spirit*

*Mourn*

*Meek*

*Hunger and thirst for righteousness*

*Merciful*

*Pure in heart*

*Peacemakers*

*Persecuted for righteousness' sake*

#### **Promised kingdom reward**

*Kingdom of heaven*

*They shall be comforted*

*They shall inherit the earth*

*They shall be satisfied*

*They shall receive mercy*

*They shall see God*

*They shall be called sons of God*

*Kingdom of heaven*

What do you notice? Aren't these desirable, even in the kingdom of man? Comfort. Inheritance. Satisfaction. Mercy. Even relationship with God. The world pursues these but does so in exactly the opposite way. The way to gain a kingdom is not to be poor in spirit but rich in spirit. Meek people don't get much in this world, do they? How about satisfaction? Our Ecclesiastes series had something to say about that. Solomon went after it like a billionaire playboy only to find no lasting satisfaction. Solomon didn't try meekness. Few do. What does hunger for righteousness get you? We hunger for food, love, sex, attention, affirmation, and we are constantly dissatisfied. Jesus says that you have to hunger for righteousness to be satisfied.

This is the radical nature of The Beatitudes and the sermon as a whole. It's like Jesus is playing opposite day. Everything the world tells you, in the kingdom of God it is the opposite. We, the fish, can't imagine life in a kingdom like this. But it sounds wonderful.

## **What Does it Mean to be “Blessed”?**

Obviously this is the repeated word and Jesus holds it out as very desirable. But what does it mean? Some translations have gone with “happy,” but this puts the emphasis on the wrong place and many people read this wrongly. Blessed isn’t describing how we feel about ourselves or our lives, blessed is describing God’s perspective on us. This is an objective reality. God approves when his people are merciful or peacemakers. The byproduct is our gladness in his approval.

Like a son is blessed who has the approval of his dad. The approval is the blessing. Years ago Max Lucado wrote a book on The Beatitudes entitled, *The Applause of Heaven*. That’s my favorite definition. When we are poor in spirit, we hear something. Heaven’s approval. When we hunger and thirst for righteousness...wait, do you hear something? Applause. It certainly blesses us, but the real blessing is the approval of God.

### **Blessed are the Poor in Spirit**

There are eight beatitudes. I want to focus on the first one.

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* (Matthew 5:3)

So we know what blessed means. But what about poor in spirit? We could take this as materially poor. The problem is that it doesn’t say “poor in money” or “poor in wallet.” It says, *“poor in spirit.”* So it doesn’t matter your status, financial or otherwise; this is possible.

Poor in what way? Lacking in spirit? Impoverished in emotional resource? See this isn’t as easy as it sounds. The promise is that the poor in spirit have the kingdom of God. Notice “is.” For theirs “is” the kingdom of God. That’s present tense. So there is a connection between poor in spirit and a present obtaining of the kingdom of God. That is why this one is so important. It is the foundation for all the others, and in some ways, the entire *Sermon on the Mount*. Here is the foundation of it all.

Poor in spirit means humble. Selfless. To be rich in spirit is to be full of self. We say that about someone—he’s so full of himself. What do we mean? In his heart, there is no room for caring or loving someone else because his heart is all taken up with his own needs and concerns. His heart is filled with his kingdom.

The person who is poor in spirit has emptied himself of himself. This isn’t a personality type. This isn’t being introverted or fearful or hesitant. This isn’t the sort of fake humility that wants everyone to know how humble he or she is. “To be ‘poor in Spirit’ is to realize that I have nothing, am nothing, and can do nothing, and have need of all things. Poverty of spirit is a consciousness of my emptiness, the result of the Spirit’s work within.” (A.W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, p.17).

Martyn Lloyd Jones once told the story of a man who picked him up at the train station and demanded that he carry his bags for him, and went on to tell Jones that he was a deacon in the church, and how insignificant he was in the church, how he was not a great man, “I’m not important at all.” He was proud of how humble he was.

We are born full of ourselves. Full of self-concern. Self-focus. Self-indulgence. Me. Me. Me. My 1-year-old daughter doesn't have to be coached in putting herself first. Some people live their whole lives this way. Their beatitude is, *Blessed are the rich in spirit, for theirs is their own kingdom*. But the prideful person will never inherit the kingdom of God because there's no room in their heart for it.

What brings a sinner to the point where he is willing to give up his kingdom? Pain. Heartbreak. Consciousness of sin. You have cancer. A shocking moral failure. Loneliness. Really anything that points out the emptiness of my heart kingdom. *I don't want to live for me anymore*. We don't pour out fresh milk. But what do you do when you realize that gallon of milk has gone bad? You get rid of it. You want to. This is how the Spirit of God helps us by convicting us of sin and helping us to see we need a Savior named Jesus. We have to be empty to be filled with anything else.

Now the empty heart, the impoverished self, is ready to receive a precious gift. The kingdom of God is the rule of God through Christ. When we are broken over our sin and personally place our trust in Jesus, *"for theirs is the kingdom of God."* Now God fills us with something far, far better.

These two heart conditions are pictured in Jesus' story of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying at the temple (Luke 18:9ff). The Pharisee prays, *"God, I thank you that I am not like other men...like this tax collector."* (Verse 11) The tax collector is doing no comparing to others. He is only looking in his heart and he says, *"God, be merciful to me a sinner!"* (Verse 13) Jesus said, the tax collector went home justified before God. (Verse 14)

*"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."* (Luke 18:14) That's not just life in the kingdom; that is how we gain entrance in the first place. Brokenness over our sin. Faith in Jesus' work on the cross. We don't make room in our hearts for the kingdom; we open our hearts to the King.

I read this many years ago and it has stuck with me I think because my life is more the judge than the burglar in the story.

*"At a church service in England a most unusual thing occurred. A pastor saw a former thief kneeling beside a judge of the High Court of England. After his release the thief had become converted and became a Christian worker. After the service the judge happened to walk out with the pastor and said, "Did you notice who was kneeling beside me at the Communion rail this morning?" The pastor replied, "Yes, but I didn't think that you did." The two walked in silence for a few more moments, when the judge declared, "What a miracle of grace." The pastor nodded in agreement. "Yes. What a marvelous miracle of grace." Then the judge asked, "But to whom do you refer?" The pastor responded, "Why, to the conversion of that convict." "But I was not referring to him. I was thinking of myself." Surprised, the pastor replied, "You were thinking of yourself? I don't understand."*

*"Yes," the judge went on. "It was natural for the burglar to respond to God's grace when he came out of jail. His life was nothing but a desperate history of crime, and when he saw the Savior he knew there was salvation and hope and joy for him. He understood how much he needed that help. But I...I was taught from earliest infancy to be a gentleman - that my word was my bond, that I was to say my prayers, go to church, receive Communion. I went on to Oxford, took my degrees, was called to the bar, and eventually ascended to judge. My friend, it was God's grace that drew me; it was God's*

*grace that opened my heart to receive Christ. I'm a greater miracle of His grace."* (R. Kent Hughes, *Are Evangelicals Born Again?* p. 30)

Here is the beatitude in song:

*"Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling;  
Naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace;  
Foul, I to the fountain fly;  
Wash me, Savior, or I die."* (Augustus M. Toplady, *Rock of Ages*)

Jesus doesn't start his sermon with a nice story or poem. He goes for the jugular. Who are we? Who do we see ourselves to be? The only people who are granted the privilege of salvation in the kingdom of God, are those who are broken and humble, whose only hope is in God's grace through Jesus to them. We look to him for salvation. We don't earn it. We don't brag about it. We're like a beggar with hands open to receive. When a person humbles themselves before God, there is a sound in the distance. Applause. It is the approval of God, who opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Not just grace, but salvation. And not just salvation, a kingdom. Not just a kingdom, eternal life.

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