

“Three Short Years – The Beatitudes”

Matthew 5:1–16

The true story

As Jesus enacted the arrival of God’s kingdom in his healings, he also taught and explained what the kingdom’s arrival really meant for how we live now as well as how we will live when the kingdom is fully consummated. Matthew collected many of the teachings and brought them together into a large block that is Matthew chapters 5-7. We can be sure that Jesus repeated these teachings in many forms at many times.



Spanning three chapters, the Sermon on the Mount is the largest and longest block of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew’s Gospel. Though we may not realize it, much of the Sermon on the Mount is familiar even to Christians who don’t read the Bible. In it we find the Lord’s prayer, the Beatitudes, the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world,” lust in the heart,¹ turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, “love your enemies,” “do not judge, so that you may not be judged,” the narrow gate, wolves in sheep’s clothing, houses built on rocks v. houses built on sand – all this and much more! With so much here, the obvious question is what do we do with it all? How do we begin to make sense of it?

Because there is so much in the Sermon on the Mount that seems far removed from the “real world,” many Christians tend to see the Sermon as an impossible ideal reflecting a world that will be great when it comes . . . but sure has little to do with the lives we lead right now! Even when we correctly understand that the Sermon is about the Kingdom of God, we think of the Kingdom as some future-only reality, rather than remembering that the Kingdom is present-but-still coming or that it has arrived already and not yet. In the end, reading the Sermon on the Mount as if it is a wonderful, but impossible, ideal is the one thing we *cannot* do.

The Beatitudes

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is not a new and more stringent system of rules nor is it an impossible ideal. Rather, when Jesus sits down to teach his followers, he is training them in the Kingdom of God. These nine beatitudes, with which Jesus begins his teaching, are not simply an introduction to what follows – they are its very foundation. These are not “entrance requirements” to God’s Kingdom. They are not conditional – none of them say “if you will x, then y.” They are not “attitudes.”

Rather, these are straightforward declarative statements of what is. Indeed, Eugene Boring goes further.² He notes that the Beatitudes do not merely declare what is; they bring it into being – much like an umpire crying out “strike” or a minister pronouncing a couple man and wife. The Beatitudes are Gospel – they proclaim to the world the Good News!

Here is how NT Wright translates the Beatitudes in his *Kingdom New Testament*.³

³ ‘Wonderful news for the poor in spirit! The kingdom of heaven is yours.

⁴ ‘Wonderful news for the mourners! You’re going to be comforted.

⁵ ‘Wonderful news for the meek! You’re going to inherit the earth.

⁶ ‘Wonderful news for people who hunger and thirst for God’s justice! You’re going to be satisfied.

⁷ ‘Wonderful news for the merciful! You’ll receive mercy yourselves.

⁸ ‘Wonderful news for the pure in heart! You will see God.

¹ In 1976, presidential candidate Jimmy Carter gave an interview to Playboy magazine in which he said that though he had never had an affair, he had “lusted in his heart.” This got a lot of public attention at the time (he dropped 15 points in the polls), but Carter was only striving to be true to Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, though why he chose that forum in which to bear his soul always puzzled me!

² From Eugene Boring’s excellent commentary on Matthew’s Gospel in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Abingdon, 1995. Another excellent and readable commentary is by Douglas Hare in the *Interpretation* series.

³ Wright, N.T. *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 34–35.

⁹ ‘Wonderful news for the peacemakers! You’ll be called God’s children.

¹⁰ ‘Wonderful news for people who are persecuted because of God’s way! The kingdom of heaven belongs to you.

¹¹ ‘Wonderful news for you, when people slander you and persecute you, and say all kinds of wicked things about you falsely because of me! ¹² Celebrate and rejoice: there’s a great reward for you in heaven. That’s how they persecuted the prophets who went before you.’

Because these are prophetic pronouncements they point us toward the teacher. They are not self-evident. It is Jesus’ authority that makes the Beatitudes the foundation of the Sermon.

Everything is changing, Jesus says. The world is not as long as it seems, for the Kingdom of God is arriving.

The Kingdom of God

Each of the nine Beatitudes points us to God’s Kingdom (the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew). They either mention the kingdom directly (the first and eighth Beatitude) or to some aspect of it. In the kingdom of God, his people will be comforted and filled and shown mercy. They will inherit the earth. They will be rewarded in heaven. They will be called the children of God. They will see God!⁴ All the rest of the Sermon on the Mount has to be read in this bright light.

So to reiterate, Jesus is again proclaiming the Kingdom is arriving and it is indeed wonderful news, the best new possible. With the arrival of the Kingdom of God, mourners will be comforted and the peacemakers will be called children of God. As Mary sings to Elizabeth before Jesus was even born, God is turning the world upside down (Luke 1:51-53).

For whom is the Kingdom of Heaven?

The kingdom of heaven is for the people of God. The people of God are those who place their faith in Jesus Christ, in God. Those who have faith in Jesus strive to be ever-truer disciples. Those who are disciples of Christ strive to be Christ-like, much as an apprentice strives to be like the master. In the Beatitudes, Jesus teaches about his followers about the characteristics of disciples about living in the Kingdom -- even in the present. Here are some thoughts on each Beatitude.

- Those who are “poor in spirit” are those who know that they are dependent in God. As Boring puts it: “Persons who are pronounced blessed are not those who claim a robust ego and strong sense of self-worth, but those whose only identity and security is in God.”
- “Those who mourn” doesn’t refer only to the death of loved ones, but also to our lament for the condition of God’s creation and his people. In other words, those who strive for the kingdom of God realize how far short of God’s hope the present world falls.
- Like “poor in spirit,” meekness (meaning gentleness and humility) flies in the face of conventional wisdom about what it takes to be “successful.” Of course, Jesus also challenges us to reconsider what we mean by success! (see Psalm 37:9,11 also).

What is a beatitude?

The Sermon on the Mount is not the only place we find beatitudes in the Bible. For example, Psalm 1 begins “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked.” This is a beatitude. Many more are in Revelation: 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; and 22:14!!

A beatitude is written so as to be a declarative statement of fact. It is not an opinion. It is not a command. (You English majors will know that a beatitude is written in the indicative mood!)

The first word of each beatitude in the Bible seems to pose a problem for translators. In Greek, the word is *makarios*. In the secular Greek world, it meant simply “happy” or “fortunate.” At times you find it translated this way, such as Psalm 1:1 in the NRSV. But in the religious context, “happy” is not the best choice; “blessed” is better, such as the NRSV translators used in Matthew.

This matters because a beatitude is centered on what God does, not some feeling on our part. It is God who blesses. The opposite of “blessed” is not “unhappy,” it is “cursed.” And these blessings flow from the arrival of God’s kingdom.

⁴ In Revelation 22:4, God’s people see his face. Compare this with Exodus 33:20 where God warns Moses that he cannot see God’s face and live. We don’t need to get too literal here. God doesn’t have a face like you or I do. But just reflect for a while on this imagery and the promise that we will see God as Adam once did, when, in the evenings, God would come and walk in the garden with his children. The significance and comfort of what the biblical writers are trying to tell us ought to take our breath away!

- “Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” are those who long for the coming of God’s kingdom and the vindication of right. At the same time we need to understand that Jesus brings comfort to those who are quite literally poor, hungry, and thirsty.
- Matthew chooses a Greek word for “mercy” that is not merely about having compassion for others – the merciful are those who act on their compassion.
- In v. 8, purity of heart goes beyond the avoidance of impure thoughts to a singleminded devotion to God.
- Many of Jesus’ followers expected him to call for the overthrow of the Roman oppressors, by force if necessary. But Jesus disappoints them. The people of the kingdom are people of peace. In God’s kingdom, swords are broken into plowshares.

The Light to the World

In the verses immediately after the Beatitudes, Jesus reminds his disciples that they are to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light to the world.” This was not new to Jesus. The Jews understood that they had always had a mission larger than themselves. For us, being the “light to the world” means that we are to lift Jesus up for all the world to see, so that all the world might be drawn to him, enabling all the world to see his saving love. Because Jesus announced and inaugurated the arrival of God’s kingdom, we live in the “bright interval” between Easter and the final, great consummation of the story, the renewal of all creation and the “new heaven and new earth” (Rev 21:1)

The early Christians found great joy because they understood that they lived not in the last days, but in the first days of a new age! We live in such days as well and we should find such joy, a joy that will shine in us for all to see, inviting them to join us in the community of God’s people!!

Jesus knows that to the extent that his disciples move toward “Christ-likeness,” they will be increasingly out of step with the world around them. They will be reviled and persecuted as they shape their lives around the values of the kingdom. Jesus pronounces blessing on them and on their prophetic mission . . . our mission . . . to be the light to the world.

*Training in the Kingdom of Heaven*⁵

Richard Hays⁶ notes that Jesus as an authoritative teacher is a dominant theme of Matthew’s Gospel. The church is seen as a community of disciples, of those being taught to be evermore Christ-like. In this light, we see that the Sermon on the Mount is training in the Kingdom of God, which was arriving in and through Jesus. Jesus provides the disciples plenty of on-the-job training as they carry out Jesus’ ministry. But Jesus also trains his disciples as a Jewish teacher would – by sitting them down and talking to them about the nature of the Kingdom. So it is no surprise that Jesus teaches his disciples that they are to be the “light to the world” – the training has a purpose that goes beyond these individuals. Likewise, Jesus closes the Sermon with a call to obedience. What is the point of training if there is no action?

The Sermon on the Mount is not about how well we can conform to a set of rules. Rather, it is about our character lived out as God’s people. Our actions flow outward from our character. Selflessness is a matter of the heart, not a rulebook. But, you might ask, isn’t what Jesus is asking of his disciples unrealistic and impossible? Jesus’ answer is “no.” We have been born from above (John 3); we are new creations. With God, all things are possible. With faith, nothing is impossible. In the healing story from Matthew 17, one cannot miss Jesus’ palpable frustration that as far along in their training as they are, the disciples still don’t get it. By virtue of God’s creative work in our lives, nothing is impossible. Our selfish, cynical hearts can change. Jesus’ many teachings in the Sermon are not unrealistic, they lead us toward what is truly real and good and enduring in this world and in the kingdom of God.

⁵ Matthew’s Gospel is the most “Jewish” of the four Gospels in the NT. Respecting the sensibilities of his Jewish readers, Matthew refers to the “Kingdom of God” as the “Kingdom of Heaven.” God’s name, even the word “God,” was so sacred to many Jews that they would not say it aloud. Even today, you can find ultra-orthodox websites that will only spell out “God” as “G-d”!

⁶ You may have noticed how often I refer to Richard Hays’ book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. This is a passionate and highly regarded book that brings together the ethical choices of our day and the vision of Jesus and the early Christians. If you are ready for a little meat, I recommend it.