

Introduction to the Beatitudes

Perhaps there is no greater example of the collision of Jesus's message and the Pharisees' legalism than the Sermon on the Mount. In a sense, the Sermon on the Mount was Jesus's inaugural sermon into His ministry... and it has stood the test of time.

Far from being a cosmic killjoy, God loves people and wants them to rush into the His saving grace. And so, as Jesus sat down to teach, He chose to begin the most famous and important sermon ever preached with what is known as the Beatitudes.

Jesus organized the Beatitudes as follows:

- Verses 3–5 deal with the *individual's heart* personally (as does Matthew 5:13–20).
- Verse 6 deals with *our genuine relationship with the Lord* (as does Matthew 6).
- Verses 7–12 deal with *our relationships with others*—how we may impact them, and how they might relate to us (as does Matthew 7).¹

In other words, the three sections of the Beatitudes are:

- ***Heart*** (verses 3-5)
- ***Devotion with God*** (verse 6)
- ***Concern for others*** (verses 7-12)

Obviously, Jesus's 3-part outline of the beatitudes (as seen above) foreshadows His words in Matthew 22:37-40, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

¹ Stuart Weber, *Matthew: HNTC* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 57-58. Italics and new formatting are mine.

Additionally, as is the case with significant biblical concepts and passages, the beatitudes can be more than a little confusing. Specifically, as one scholar put it, the “beatitudes often contain sacred paradoxes (Mt. 5:3 ff.; Lk. 6:20–22; 1 Pt. 3:14; 4:14; Rev. 14:13).... In the impressive form of beatitudes basic statements are here made about those who may regard themselves as citizens of the kingdom of God. *The power of the statements lies in their reversal of all human values.*”²

In his book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Dr. Richard B. Hays winsomely summarizes both the paradoxical element and significance of the beatitudes as “an upside-down reality, or—more precisely—they define reality in such a way that the usual order of things is seen to be upside down in the eyes of God.”³

Another way to describe the beatitudes is in the same way that one would describe the Sermon on the Mount. They contain *Kingdom norms*—this is what life should look like down here and how we should be approaching our relationship with God and people. The beatitudes are based on *joy* (that flows from God’s blessing) while our modern day understanding of happiness is based on our current circumstances. *Joy is a product of our faith which extends beyond our current circumstances.*

1. Have someone in your Life Group read Matthew 5:1-12 and then Matthew 5:3 (again). What does it mean to be “poor in spirit”?

Give everyone a chance to share. Read the notes below so if a group member start taking the conversation in a certain direction, you can bring the conversation back to Matthew 5:3 and the concept of *poor in spirit*.

Blessed

Few know this, but the word *blessed* in the Old Testament is used in the same way as Jesus used the word in the Beatitudes (Ps. 1:1; 31:1; Job 5:17; Dan. 12:12). Using the word *blessed* as Jesus did in the Beatitudes wasn’t an uncommon teaching style—it was one the people were used to hearing or reading.

² Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Vol. 4. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976), 368. Italics are mine.

³ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Community—A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), 321.

The word *blessed* (μακάριος) can be translated “‘blessed, fortunate, happy’... usually in the sense privileged recipient of divine favor.”⁴ Some say that the word *blessed* can also mean “congratulations.” Others say the word could be translated as “joyful” or “fortunate.”

Poor in spirit

The word that is translated as *poor* in Matthew 5:3, Ptōchos, can be translated as “to shrink, cower, or cringe” as someone would beg.⁵ “Classical Greek used the word to refer to a person reduced to total destitution, who crouched in a corner begging... The term did not mean simply poor but begging poor.”⁶ Diving deeper into the meaning of *poor*, the word can refer to “state of personal inadequacy; a state of faintheartedness; or a moral quality of humility; or as indicating a state of personal awareness, whether as a knowledge of one’s own personal inadequacy (before God); or as an insight into and acceptance of the general human condition as a humble one.”⁷

In the original Greek, *in spirit* broadens the meaning of poverty or being poor. *In spirit* also refers to points “to the element of decision or choice in the embracing of poverty; referring to the human attitude or state of mind; or indicating an awareness of a state of being as distinct from the state of being (or mind) as such.”⁸

When *in spirit* is added to the word *poor*, they communicate an authentic picture of how deep, personal, and real our brokenness is. The two words are used in “Greek were used to describe poverty; the one used here was the more severe of the two. It was often used of a beggar who was dependent on a provider.

2. Describe how you’ve seen “poor in spirit” play out in the lives of others or in our society as a whole.

Christian Ethics professor Dr. Scott Rae often highlights the conflict between society’s latest moral norms and our desires, beliefs, and values.⁹ Society is drifting from values based on Christian-Judeo principles and is shifting to moral ambiguity. Christian Philosopher J.P. Moreland writes that society sees “no such thing as objective reality, truth, value, reason, and so

⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew: PNTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 97.

⁵ John MacArthur, Jr, *Matthew 1-7: MNTC Vol. 1* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 145.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 199.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Scott B Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics 4th Ed* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 330.

forth. All these are social constructions, creations of linguistic practices, and as such are relative not to individuals, but to social groups that share a narrative.”¹⁰ In other words, our society as a whole is drifting further and further away from God. We need the Kingdom of God to be with us now more than ever.

Even though Jesus’s Kingdom is not of this world (Jn. 18:36), that doesn’t mean that Jesus’s Kingdom doesn’t have an impact on society. Dr. Wayne Grudem writes that the Kingdom of God has an impact on the world by “changing people’s hearts and their deep convictions.”¹¹

3. What are some examples of “poor in spirit” from the lives of Jesus’s disciples, friends, crowds, and interactions?

Obviously, there are many examples of this in scripture, BUT try to stay silent and allow others to give their answer.

If no one else answers, then feel free to share some of your own examples. Just in case you’re struggling to find some examples, feel free to throw out some of these names and scenarios:

- Zacchaeus
- John the Baptist
- The man born blind (from John 9)
- The woman who anointed Jesus with oil

4. Setting the context for the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus proclaimed in Matthew 4:17, “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Actually, Jesus taught more about the Kingdom of Heaven than any other topic. Why did He primarily focus on the Kingdom of Heaven?

Kingdom of Heaven and Kingdom of God

¹⁰ J.P. Moreland, “Truth, Contemporary Philosophy, and the Postmodern Turn,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 48/1 (March 2005), 79.

¹¹ Wayne Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 27.

The word *kingdom* has different meanings when used outside of the Bible and “alternates between a functional sense—royal sovereignty, monarchy, royal dignity, royal office—and the geographical sense of kingdom or realm.”¹²

The phrases *Kingdom of Heaven* and/or *Kingdom of God* are used 100+ times in the gospels. But do the phrases have the same meaning and if so, why did the gospel writers use two titles for the same idea? Most importantly, the two phrases are talking about the same idea—they’re synonymous. As to why there are two different phrases in the gospels, perhaps the answer is found in the original audience of the gospel writers. Matthew was writing to Jewish people and Christians with Jewish backgrounds who may have been apprehensive about using God’s name for fear of misusing His name (Ex. 20:7). On the other hand, Mark and Luke’s original audience was primarily made up of Gentiles.

Biblically speaking, the *Kingdom of God* is an Old Testament concept that has God as the true and rightful king of Israel (cf. 1 Sam. 8:7), and ultimately, over the world. The human kingship was fostered the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10) and the family of Jesse (2 Sam. 7) that culminated in Jesus, the Messiah and Son of David. Jesus began (or inaugurated the Kingdom of God) when He was born in Bethlehem. The Kingdom of God was a focus of Jesus’s ministry as He viewed the Kingdom having its fulfillment in and through Himself (Matt. 10:7; 11:12; 12:28; Mk. 1:15; Lk. 10:9, 11; 11:20; 16:16; 17:20–21).

In John 18:36, Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world. First, Jesus maintained that the Kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom. More importantly for our purposes, Jesus saw himself as the king. Every kingdom has a king—a leader or a “public figure who wields power over an identifiable group of supporters with the intention of carrying out a social agenda.”¹³ But Jesus was not the typical kind of King. As opposed to other world leaders and public figures, Jesus “reconfigured the role of power in politics. Specifically, he forfeited any exertion of power for his own self-interests in lieu of service and suffering for others.”¹⁴

When writing about the Kingdom of God, the late and brilliant New Testament Scholar, George Eldon Ladd points out that people receive the Kingdom of God with the attitude and humility of a little child (Mk. 10:15; Lk. 12:32). In one of his works, Ladd then rhetorically asks what exactly people receive when they follow Jesus. He then quickly answers his own question:

¹² Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament Vol 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 201.

¹³ Mark E. Moore, *Kenotic Politics: The Reconfiguration of Power in Jesus’ Political Praxis* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2013), 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 149.

“What is received is God’s rule. In order to enter the future realm of the Kingdom, one must submit himself in perfect trust to God’s rule here and now.”¹⁵

5. In the video lesson, Dusty pointed out that, “Jesus doesn’t say ‘blessed are the poor in spirit BECAUSE they admit it... Jesus’ agenda was that His Kingdom was available now to ALL people, including those poor in spirit.” If you feel comfortable, share a time when you had to acknowledge how you were “poor in spirit.” What lesson did God teach you or what blessing did you receive from owning your “spiritual bankruptcy”?

Use this question as a time to really allow people to talk and share their story. Be comfortable with good healthy silence. Also, be prepared to share an example from your life—especially if no one else is sharing. If no one else is sharing, don’t force anyone to share or “call anyone out. People might be getting comfortable again in regard to being around other individuals. This is also a personal question, so not everyone may want to share—and that’s OK!

6. Read Isaiah 9:1-2 & 61:1-3. According to these verses, how did (does) Jesus bring the Kingdom of Heaven to the world? Jesus gives a description and a promise in each beatitude. In Matthew 5:3, what is the relationship between “poor in spirit” and “Kingdom of Heaven”?

In Matthew 5:3, Jesus says in the original Greek that the kingdom of God is “αὐτῶν... ‘made up of them’ ... For the kingdom as something that may be possessed cf. Mt. 21:43; 25:34.”¹⁶ As we read in Luke 12:32, God has given this Kingdom to all believers and they participate in it as His subjects. “To say that it is to such people that the kingdom of heaven belongs means (not of course that they themselves hold royal authority but) that they are the ones who gladly accept God’s rule and who therefore enjoy the benefits which come to his subjects.”¹⁷

Those who are *poor in spirit* understand they in and of themselves cannot live their life in such a way as to where they bring peace that only God’s Kingdom can produce.¹⁸ Only Jesus can bring

¹⁵ George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 21.

¹⁶ John Nolland, 201.

¹⁷ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew: NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 165.

¹⁸ D.A. Carson, *Matthew: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Vol. 8* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1984), 132.

about the Kingdom of God and the peace that comes with it, because “fallen humanity will never create social utopia; the truth of Rom 8:18 must remain important consolation for many people.”¹⁹

Thus, the Kingdom of God is something that we share with others. In the book, *What Made Jesus Mad? Rediscover the Blunt, Sarcastic, Passionate Savior of the Bible*, Tim Harlow writes, “Denied access is what made Jesus angry, because our mission is to help people get in, not to keep them out. Access is the key. God wants his Kingdom to be easy to get into. He paid a high price for this barrier-free access, so let’s get it right.”²⁰

Jesus told the Pharisees, “Go figure out what this Scripture means: ‘I’m after mercy, not religion.’ I’m here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders” (Matthew 9:13, *The Message*). Later in the New Testament, Jesus’s brother James said in Acts 15:19, “And so my judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.” When reading this verse, try inserting the word *people* for *the Gentiles* or someone’s name.

We should not make it difficult for _____ who are/is turning to God.

That’s what we should see as the mission of God’s Kingdom—transforming people’s hearts so they start following Jesus instead of running from Him. Then and only then, will we see society begin to change.

¹⁹ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew: NAC* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 99.

²⁰ Tim Harlow, *What Made Jesus Mad?: Rediscover the Blunt, Sarcastic, Passionate Savior of the Bible*, Tim Harlow (Grand Rapids: Thomas Nelson, 2019), 178.