

The Beatitudes

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one through whom all blessings flow, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, amen.

Today's Scripture reading from the fifth chapter of Matthew is commonly known as the Beatitudes. These Beatitudes are so well known, most of us stop listening when they are being read. We already think we know what they mean and have already made up our minds how relevant they are to our lives...

Before we dig into the specifics of the Beatitudes, let's focus for a minute on the context of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Verse one says, "When Jesus saw the crowds he went up on the mountain, sat down, and began to teach." So, my first question is who are these crowds that came to hear Jesus speak? By this time in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus had already been on the religious circuit. Back in chapter four, Matthew tells us, "²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. ²⁴ So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. ²⁵ And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan." Before the crowds hear the Messiah's great Sermon on the Mount, they are the objects of his compassion and his healing. Having done nothing, nothing at all, people from throughout the entire region have already

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benefited from the great mercy and grace of God. So, grace comes before task, mercy before demand, healing before command. The first act of the Messiah is not the imposition of his commandments, but the giving of himself. Today's Beatitudes presupposes yesterday's gifts of healing and forgiveness. We're still in that same mode of receiving God's Grace and Mercy before we even hear anything about the Law or the Commands of Christ...

Did you know that The Beatitudes are an entire literary category all by themselves? At least one of the commentaries I studied this week said so. I did a search on the entire Bible and found 47 times where a verse or sentence uses the words Blessed are... I'm not so sure 47 times would rank it as it's own separate literary genre, but I did find these "Blessed are..." statements in several places besides these verses in Matthew and the ones in Luke. They're in the Old Testament, the Psalms, and also sprinkled throughout the New Testament as well. The most famous Beatitudes are the ones listed here in Matthew's Gospel and the ones listed in the 6th chapter of Luke's Gospel. These two lists have been compared and contrasted since scholars first began critically studying the scriptures. Most of us know or pretty quickly recognize the similarities and differences between the two. For example, Matthew is known for spiritualizing the list. Here's what I mean. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor." Matthew adds the words, "in spirit." I always thought Matthew meant people who

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have a lack of spirit, such as those who suffer from depression. While that might be the case, I think it's more likely he is referring to people who are "spiritually poor." These are people who feel their spiritual need. These are people who know their need for God and for a savior. They are poor "in the realm of their spirit," but happy because they know they can rely on and trust God for their daily bread. They may be poor financially, but Matthew wants us to know they are happy because they're in a position to receive good things from God. The poor in spirit don't recognize their spiritual need for God as a separate need, but rather they stand before God and recognize their need for God is absolute and all encompassing.

The other thing that I found really interesting is this phrase "The Kingdom of Heaven." When we think of a kingdom we usually think about a specific land or territory. That territory has boundaries and is located in time and in space in a certain locale. For example, the United Kingdom is located across the Atlantic Ocean. It's been in existence in some form or other since 1707. Our usual understanding of a Kingdom is tied to the territory of the king. When Matthew, or Jesus uses the term Kingdom it has a totally different meaning and connotation. In the Greek language the phrase translated as Kingdom of Heaven is the phrase "*ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ*." Basileia is the noun form of the verb Basilaous. It means the act of ruling or reigning as a King would do. This reigning or ruling isn't tied to

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any specific place or time, but rather happens where ever and when ever the King happens to be. So, the Kingdom of Heaven isn't tied to a galaxy far far away or to a time at the end of all things when Christ comes again, but rather is present where ever and when ever The King of Kings and Lord of Lords is present and reigning in people's lives.

Another way to look at it... If the benefits of God's reign only happen after you get to heaven or at the end of time when Jesus finally comes again, then I wouldn't be a part of this thing called Christianity. There has to be more to it than we must suffer here, but wait until you die, then things will be better and you too will be blessed. Under this assumption Karl Marx would have been correct to say religion is the opiate of the people. It bids us to put up with oppression, injustice, and immorality *now* for the sake of the life to come in heaven. Jesus didn't buy that interpretation, and neither should we! Jesus said, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." The Kingdom or the reign of God happens where ever and when ever God rules in the lives of God's people. Every time we repent and return to the Lord our God with all our heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind we are living under God's rule and the Kingdom of Heaven is ours right here and right now. That's a religion and a faith I can understand and get behind 100 percent! Isn't that exactly what we pray for in the Lord's Prayer when we pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven?" We're really praying for God's rule or God's

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reign to come for us. We get to help make that happen in both big and small ways every day. It's not about earning our grace, but living into God's promise.

I wish we had the time to go in depth into each one of these Beatitudes. Maybe someday I'll put together a Sunday School class on them... For now I did want to take a minute to look at the second half of our scripture reading. These verses explain how to live under God's reign and what that might be like... When Jesus says we're to be salt, he means under God's reign the people of God add flavor to their world. Because they are noticed in the greater society outside of their religious circles. So, how you live your life matters because people who are not Christian are watching. They see what we do in all circumstances. Jesus never intended for his followers to be a secret organization nor a inward looking bunch of people unconcerned about their world. He tells us to be a lamp on a hill. He says we should shine our lights before others so they see our good works and in turn glorify our father in heaven. That's what brings the Kingdom of Heaven to earth...

May our lights shine even more brightly as we live more and more under the graceful and merciful rule of our Father in Heaven. May the Kingdom of God reign in our lives every day so others see the spirit of Jesus shining in us. Amen!