Sermon on the Mount

BLESSINGS *of* THE KINGDOM

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INTRODUCTION

When a rock band or popular singer has been successful and around for a while, they eventually produce a "Greatest Hits" album—a collection of their most influential and famous songs taken from their whole catalogue of tunes. Today if you search for an artist through Apple Music or Spotify you'll find "Taylor Swift: Essentials" or a playlist entitled "This is Eagles" where some expert has curated for us a group of the musicians' most representative songs.

When we turn to the New Testament, we find several God-inspired artists telling us about who Jesus is and why He matters to our lives. One of the most influential of these artists is Matthew, whose biography about Jesus stands at the head of the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew.

Extending our musical analogy, Matthew has curated for us some of the "greatest hits" of Jesus's teachings, all for the purpose of shaping us as followers of Christ. Matthew's "Jesus: Essentials" playlist is structured around five blocks of teaching (Matthew chapters 5–7; 10; 13; 18; 23–25). And the most famous of these famous songs—the "Hotel California" (the Eagles) or "All Too Well" (Taylor Swift) song within the Greatest Hits album—is the first teaching block, what we call the Sermon on the Mount.

At least since the time of Augustine, Matthew chapters 5–7 has been given the name "Sermon on the Mount" because of its symbolic mountaintop location. Like many pastors and theologians from the early days of the church down to today, Augustine wrote a whole commentary just on these three chapters of Matthew. This is because within these chapters of Jesus's teaching we have some of the most powerful images and pointed exhortations found anywhere in Scripture. The Sermon on the Mount contains many of Jesus's most memorable sayings such as "blessed are the poor in spirit," "turn the other cheek," "don't judge lest you be judged," and "do to others as you would have them do to you." As a result, Matthew 5–7 has been one of the most studied, written about, and preached upon portion of the Bible throughout the church's history.

The Gospel of Matthew: Purpose and Structure

Before we turn to our study of the Sermon it will be helpful to make sure we understand a little bit about the Gospel of Matthew overall because the Sermon cannot be interpreted well apart from the broader story of which it is a part.

Our Gospels are simultaneously **historical, theological, and formative**. All three of these descriptors are important. They are teaching us what really happened during Jesus's life (**historical**) because Christianity is not just a set of mythological ideals divorced from real historical events. But history telling is not all the Gospels are doing. More than being a mere record of what happened, the Gospels are intentionally teaching us how to understand who God is as revealed through Jesus (**theological**). As a result we are also being invited to learn to inhabit the world in Jesus's ways and to become different people, disciples of Jesus (**formative**). As we go through this study we will see that the theological and formative aspects of the Gospels are particularly important for a good interpretation of the Sermon.

Our four Gospels all work together in four-part harmony to tell us about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They are all singing the same song but do so in different ways. Matthew is particularly interested in showing us how Jesus is the end point or goal of all that God has been doing since the creation of the world. The biblical word Matthew uses to sum up this truth is *fulfillment*. Jesus brings to completion and shows the true meaning of all the events, people, institutions, and truths of Israel's history. Once again, understanding this will be crucial in interpreting the Sermon well.

In the ancient Greco-Roman world people often wrote biographies of important military, political, and philosophical leaders. Our four Gospels fall into this same category, except with the added claim that Jesus is God Himself and is now risen from the dead, calling all people to believe in Him and become disciples. An ancient biography provided two things that were important—a record of what the person said (his or her teachings) and what the person did (his or her model of life). This combination of word and deed is exactly what we find in the Gospels. Matthew gives us a large collection of stories of the things Jesus did and said.

Students of Matthew have long observed that Matthew provides five big blocks of Jesus's teachings (**called the Five Major Discourses**) that are woven into his narrative. These teaching blocks are thematic, that is, they are teachings that center around a certain big idea that Jesus wants to communicate. The structure of his Gospel account looks like this:

- The Introduction of Jesus's Ministry and Mission (1:1–4:25)
- First Teaching Block—the Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:29)
- Stories of Jesus's Ministry (8:1–9:38)
- Second Teaching Block—Instructions to His Disciples (10:1–11:1)
- Stories of Opposition to Jesus (11:2–12:50)
- Third Teaching Block—Parables About the Kingdom of Heaven (13:1-53)
- Stories of Jesus Creating a New People of God (13:54–17:27)
- Fourth Teaching Block—Life Together for the People of God (18:1–19:1)
- Stories of Jesus and His Disciples in Conflict (19:2–22:46)
- Fifth Teaching Block—Judgment Now and in the Future (23:1–25:46)
- The End of Jesus's Earthly Ministry and the Completion of His Mission (26:1–28:20)

While our focus in this study will be on that first teaching block, it is helpful to see that this is not all that Jesus taught or did in Matthew's Gospel. We cannot isolate the Sermon from the rest of what Matthew is teaching us about Jesus. When we study the Sermon we should regularly seek connections between what we find there and the rest of Matthew's Gospel.

The Sermon on the Mount as a Vision for Life

As noted above, each of Jesus's teaching blocks is centered around a big idea, a theme that is the focus. **What theme or idea is central to the Sermon?** To answer this we can first observe that the Sermon is not a haphazard collection of sayings but is structured very intentionally around a series of triads that can be outlined like this:

ASCENDING AND SITTING (5:1-2)

A. Introduction: The Call to God's People (5:3-16)

1. Nine Beatitudes for the New People of God (5:3-12)
2. The New Covenant Witness of the People of God (5:13-16)

B. The Body: The Greater Righteousness for God's People (5:17–7:12)

1. Greater Righteousness in Relation to God's Laws (5:17-48)
   a. Proposition (5:17-20)
   b. Six Exegeses/Examples (5:21-47)
   c. Summary (5:48)
2. Greater Righteousness in Relation to Piety toward God (6:1-21)
   a. Introduction: Pleasing the Father in Heaven, not Humans (6:1)
   b. Three Examples (6:2-18)
      ** Central Teaching on Prayer (6:7-15)
   c. Conclusion: Rewards in Heaven, not on Earth (6:19-21)
3. Greater Righteousness in Relation to the World (6:19–7:12)
   a. Introduction (6:19-21)
   b. In Relation to the Goods of This World (6:22-34)
   c. In Relation to the People of This World (7:1-6)
   d. Conclusion (7:7-12)

C. Conclusion: Three Warnings Regarding the Prospect of Eschatological Judgment (7:13-27)

1. Two Kinds of Paths (7:13-14)
2. Two Kinds of Prophets (7:15-23)
3. Two Kinds of Builders (7:24-27)

DESCENDING AND ACTION (7:28–8:1)

There is a clear structure to Jesus's teaching here. The main point is found in Matthew 5:17-20—that Jesus did not come into the world to abolish or ignore what God has said or done in the past. Instead, Jesus says, He has come to "fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). In this first collection of Jesus's teachings, He is explaining what this true fulfilled righteousness looks like, that is, what it looks like to live as God's creatures, made in His image, under His gracious reign with Christ as King. The Sermon on the Mount paints a picture of what this way of greater righteousness looks like in our lives in very practical ways—in relationship to God, to others, and to the world (5:21–7:12).

This overall theme of true righteousness is introduced with Jesus's famous Beatitudes (5:3-12) because this is the end goal of Jesus's teachings—that we find true life, *shalom*, happiness (in the biblical sense). The Sermon ends with a threefold exhortation to learn from Jesus and thus grow in godly wisdom (7:13-27). In the middle of this is Jesus's focused teaching on the question of what true righteousness looks like.

And the answer to this question is that true righteousness requires wholeness (5:48; Greek, *teleios*). **Wholeness means that our external actions match our internal dispositions, that our lives align with our hearts, and vice versa.** When we have hearts that are supposedly oriented to God but lack expression in what we actually do, we are like fruitless trees (7:15-20).

On the other side, if we have actions that look good but lack hearts that truly love God and others, then we are hypocrites (6:1-2; see also 23:1-36). The solution to both of these false forms of righteousness is becoming whole, growing in maturity so that over time our heads, hearts, and hands all operate in unity. This unity is what ancient people called virtue or practiced wisdom (7:24).

As we study the Sermon we will see this idea repeated throughout the wonderfully crafted structure of the message. Jesus's point is not to condemn us but to invite us to find life and life in abundance (to use Jesus's language from John 10:10). Jesus is providing the true vision for life as God's creatures who have been invited into His kingdom, a kingdom that is here in Jesus now and will become fully so at Jesus's second coming into the world at the end of the present era.

Jesus's Invitation

All this talk of necessary righteousness could be wrongly interpreted as a burden or something crushing to our souls. Some people might think this sounds like the opposite of grace, but it is not. Jesus is calling us to become whole-person disciples, to have lives that are increasingly marked by righteous living, but this is not a duty or new law, but an invitation to what every human being was made for and longs for: true flourishing that can be found only in relationship with God.

In Matthew 11:25-27 Jesus boldly claims that knowledge of God only comes through knowledge of Himself, which itself comes only through the gift of revelation. He goes on to speak these famous words—"Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (11:28-30).

Herein we see the proper way to understand Jesus's call to be disciples, to walk in His narrow way (7:13-14), using the metaphor of an oxen yoke. To be a disciple is to take upon our necks and shoulders a constraining burden, bending our wills to someone else's to be guided. Rather than being negative and crushing, we experience the beautiful paradox of God's ways—freedom comes through submission, life comes through death, *shalom* comes through a yoke. This is because Jesus's yoke actually gives us life. He is inviting us by faith to trust that following Him will grant us true life in God's kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount is one of Jesus's explanations and applications of this life-through-yoke principle. Through studying and being transformed by the Sermon we will enter God's gracious kingdom through Christ.

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JESUS'S (SHOCKING) VISION FOR THE TRULY BLESSED LIFE

MATTHEW 5:1-16

Pop quiz: What do all people at all times want? Is there anything that we can identify as universal and timeless that drives how all humans live? If so, what is it?

That question is not new. It's been asked and answered for as long as people have been wrestling with what it means to be human. In the Greco-Roman world, before and during the time of Jesus, this question was discussed often by the great philosophers. The answer they gave was consistent. Likewise, in the first eighteen hundred years of the church this question was asked by theologians and, maybe shockingly to us, they gave the same answer. All people want to be happy.

Let's listen to what the influential church leader Augustine had to say on the issue. In Book 10 of his massive tome *The City of God*, he begins this way: "It is the decided opinion of all who use their brains, that all men desire to be happy."[1]

Happiness—a sense of peace, thriving, and contentment, not just a temporary pleasure—drives all that we do. It is fundamental to what it means to be human. We are creatures made in God's image and we are designed for flourishing—what the Bible calls *shalom*. In this assessment, Augustine agrees with all the philosophers and theologians that came before him.

We are no different today. Standing in line at my neighborhood Lowe's to buy some deck-building materials, I spied a magazine entitled, *The Happiness Formula: How to Find Joy & Live Your Best Life*. It contained a glossy ninety-five pages of essays, pro tips, charts, and graphs about the "science of happiness." In short, snappy articles, we are told how "modern science," by which they mean positive psychology, teaches us what to do

and not do to be happy. Eat right. Avoid bad relationships. Ride bicycles more like the happy Swedish people do. Practice yoga. Even a home improvement store is offering help on the happiness question.

But what about the Bible? And what about Jesus? Doesn't He teach us to deny ourselves and take up our crosses (Mark 8:34)? Yes. Isn't this the opposite of our desire for happiness? No.

Quite the contrary, Jesus's call to become His disciples, which includes suffering and self-denial, is never an end in itself. Jesus's call is an invitation to find true *shalom*. **According to Jesus, the goal of cross-bearing and self-denial is so that we might find the flourishing life (true happiness) that we are made for.** As Jesus says elsewhere, He came into the world not to condemn us or to give us a new set of duties, but so that we might find abundant life (John 10:10).

This is the drive for ultimate happiness that Augustine was talking about, and it's found all over the Bible. God is constantly appealing to us to turn to Him and live in His ways because He loves us as His children and creatures. He knows we will only find true life as we live according to His ways.

There is no place where this is clearer than in the opening section of Jesus's famous Sermon on the Mount. We call Jesus's first teaching the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12) because the Latin word *beatus* means "happy" or "flourishing." (See Closer Look.) Jesus opened His most famous sermon with nine declarations or "macarisms" about where to find true happiness. We'll see how He defined happiness is not what we expect. But like all philosophers and theologians, He's addressing the same question—*How do we find true happiness?*

As we turn to study the Beatitudes, it is good to recall how the whole Sermon is structured. Matthew 5:17-20 contains the central idea—Jesus is teaching us how to live in God's ways (being "righteous") through becoming whole people. Matthew 5:1-16 is the introduction to this teaching that appeals to our most basic human desire—to find true life.

In this introduction to the Sermon, Jesus explains in shocking ways where true life is to be found—through following His model of humility and even suffering (5:1-12). He will then invite His disciples to be His priests in the world, proclaiming and living out this same message (5:13-16).

A CLOSER LOOK

Makarios

Most English Bibles use the word *blessed* to translate Jesus's nine Beatitudes. The concept of "blessing" is an important one in the Bible and so this is an understandable translation. However, in English, *blessed* is ambiguous. We can use the English word *bless* to refer to God actively creating life and flourishing for us (the act of blessing) but we can also use it to describe the state of someone who is flourishing (the state of true happiness or *shalom*).

Hebrew, Greek, Latin (and most other languages) have two different words to describe these two different senses of *bless* but English does not. And this is where the problem lies. The Greek word used in the Beatitudes is *makarios*, which communicates the state of someone who is experiencing true happiness or flourishing. This is the same word used many places in the Old and New Testaments, including in Psalm 1, which has many parallels with the Sermon. This is not the word used to describe God actively blessing someone. Rather, *makarios* (Hebrew, *asher*; Latin, *beatus*) is used when a sage is explaining to his disciples the way to live that will bring true life. *Makarios* is the word used when a father or mother speaks proverbial wisdom to his or her children in hopes that they will find a good life. These kind of wisdom statements are called *macarisms* or *beatitudes*. This is what Jesus the Sage is providing here—the true vision of how to inhabit the world that aligns with God's coming kingdom, the only way we humans can find true life.

Unfortunately, due to our confusion over the word *blessed*, many misunderstand Jesus's Beatitudes as if they are commands to live a certain way or promises of God's blessing. This misunderstands what a macarism is. Jesus is not demanding nor cajoling us to be humble or merciful so that we will get God's favor. Rather, as God's Wisdom incarnate He is casting a vision for how to orient our hearts and lives, following His own model, so that we can find the life we are made for.

Jesus the Sage
MATTHEW 5:1-2

It would be easy to overlook these short opening words, but we would miss some important truths. Matthew tells us Jesus began His teaching ministry by ascending a mountain and sitting down. In the hilly terrain of Israel, an elevated place provided a good natural auditorium for the growing crowds following Jesus. But there was something more significant going on than this.

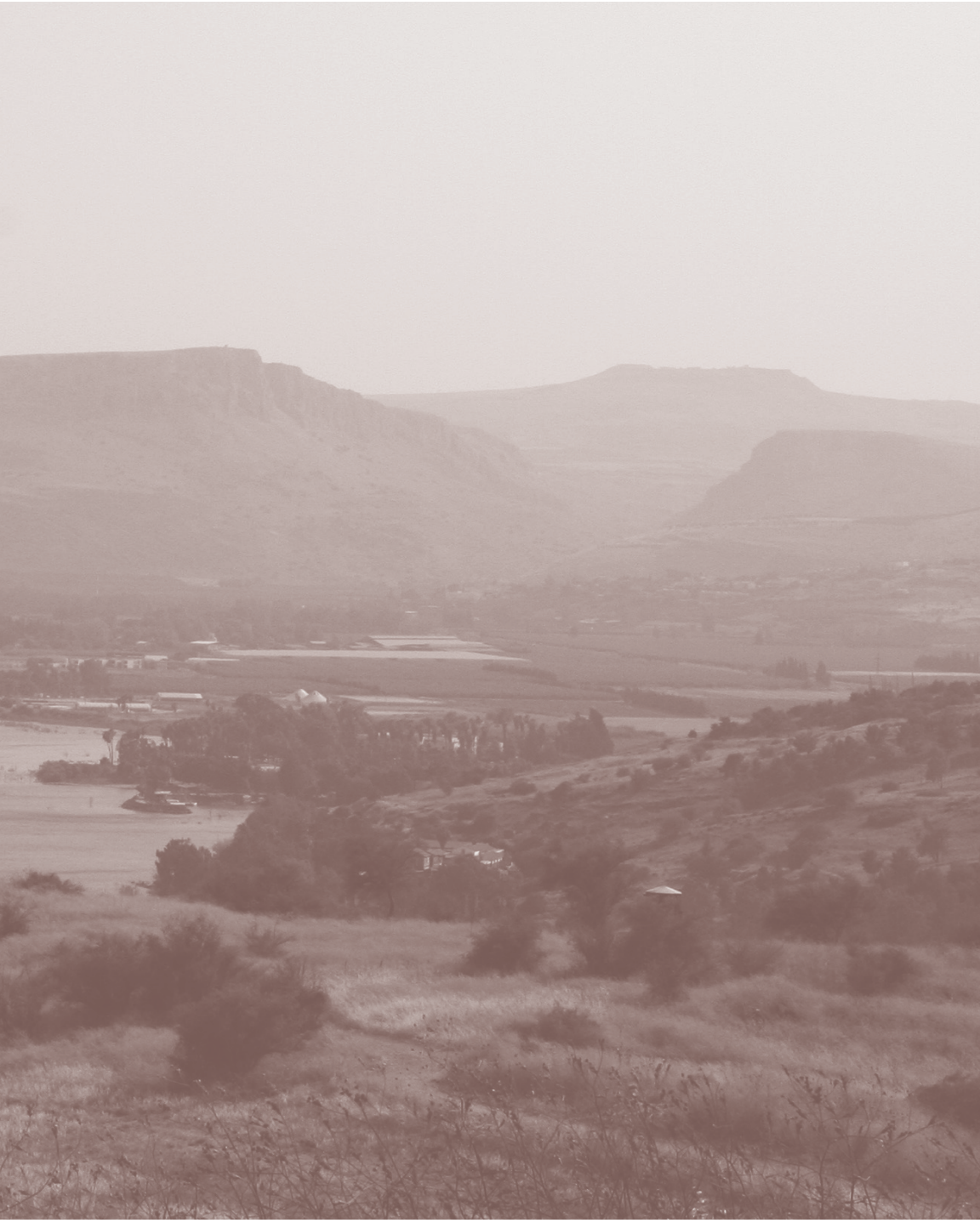
In every religion, mountains or "high places" are important because they are seen as places of revelation, of seeing—not only physically but spiritually. This was certainly true in Israel's history as well, with many key moments occurring on mountains, such as at Mount Ararat, Mount Carmel, Mount Gilead, and others. **Mountains will also play an important part in the rest of Matthew's story about Jesus** (15:29; 17:1-13; 24:1–25:46; 28:16-20).

But the most significant connection being made between Jesus and Israel's history is the comparison with Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:3; 24:15-18; 34:1-4). Throughout the preceding four chapters, Matthew made several allusions to connect Jesus with Moses. Israel's great moment of deliverance from Egypt that led to God revealing His covenantal instructions (Torah, Law) to His people is being recalled and surpassed by Jesus. Jesus is presented as the fulfillment of all that God has done in the past—affirming, completing, and transforming God's revelation for the final era of history. Even as the old covenant was given through Moses on Mount Sinai, now the new and better covenant is manifested on the Mount of the Beatitudes through the One greater than Moses (see John 1:1-18).

Matthew tells us that Jesus sat down. Once again, this is not merely a historical or physical reference, but communicates something deeper: Jesus is shown as authoritative. Teachers, philosophers, and judges in the ancient world often sat down while their hearers gathered around. This communicated respected authority, with the "chair" becoming a symbol of such teaching. Later in Matthew, Jesus will refer to the scribes and Pharisees as "seated in the chair of Moses" (Matthew 23:2), which is itself a reference to Moses sitting as judge/interpreter in Exodus 18:13. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the same idea continues with authoritative religious and legal matters coming from the Pope described as *ex cathedra* ("from the chair"). This is how Jesus is presented—as seated with authority on a mountain.

These introductory two verses set us up to listen carefully to the words of authoritative divine revelation about to flow out of Jesus's mouth.

View of the Sea of Galilee from the Mount of Beatitudes, Sea of Galilee, Israel.
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/G.B. HOWELL



Friends in High Places

Mountains are significant geography in the Bible, often serving as the setting for amazing to history-changing events. Read the Scripture references to answer the questions below.

1. After the earth was flooded, Noah's ark came to rest at Mount Ararat (Genesis 8). This important saga contain a vital promise that God would not flood the earth again. What was the important symbol?

2. Abraham climbed Mount Moriah with his son Isaac to sacrifice him—but God provided an alternative (Genesis 22). What was it? What did it symbolize?

3. Mount Sinai was the site of two significant experiences for Moses with two very striking reminders of God, the burning bush and the Ten Commandments. After receiving the Ten Commandments, Moses found the Israelites worshiping a symbol of paganism (Exodus 19–20). What was it?

4. Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:16-46). What was the symbol of power he employed?

5. Later Jesus ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:9-12).
   Who were the men in white standing there?
   Who or what do you think they intended to symbolize?

Based on this sample of passages—and there are more—what would you say a mountain symbolizes in the Bible? Read Psalm 121:1 for inspiration.

How does that compare with the other symbols depicting sin?

The Happy Life in Relationship to God
MATTHEW 5:3-6

As noted above, Jesus began His authoritative teaching with nine Beatitudes or macarisms. These are nine answers to the great question, *How do we find the truly flourishing life?* Together these Beatitudes create an overall vision for what it means to live as God's people. As such, **they should be taken together as a whole, not just individually.** They provide a composite picture of the life of God-centered wisdom.

At the same time, these statements of happiness are not meant to be comprehensive; they're not the only thing the Bible says about finding true life. Nor should we read these Beatitudes expecting them to give us a to-do list that we are to dutifully check off (as if that were possible anyways; have you read the list?). Rather, Jesus paints a picture of what a kingdom disciple looks like in terms of heart-posture, habits, sensitivities, and attitudes.

We should also note how Jesus's Beatitudes are kingdom oriented. The first and eighth Beatitudes are framed with the phrase, "For the kingdom of heaven is theirs" (5:3,10), emphasizing the theme of God's kingdom that glues it all together. Matthew has already made it clear in the preceding chapters that Jesus's message is about God's kingdom of heaven coming to earth through Jesus (see later Jesus's instruction to pray specifically for this in 6:9-10). This message was what John the Baptist preached (3:2) and is also the summary of Jesus's announcement (4:17)—"Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near." Now in the Beatitudes, Jesus makes clear who is in God's kingdom and who is not—those whose lives bear the fruit of what the Beatitudes depict.

When we take the Beatitudes as a whole, we see they can be grouped in a number of ways. For our exploration we will examine the Beatitudes in 4-5 pattern.

> *Blessed are the poor in spirit,*
> *for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.*
> *Blessed are those who mourn,*
> *for they will be comforted.*
> *Blessed are the humble,*
> *for they will inherit the earth.*
> *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,*
> *for they will be filled.*
>
> **MATTHEW 5:3-6**

In this first grouping Jesus describes a kingdom disciple as one whose life is distinguished by a posture of **great humility, brokenness, and dependence on God** (5:3-5). This can be summed up as "hungering and thirsting for righteousness" (5:6).

"Poor in spirit" (5:3) uses the metaphor of poverty to describe the person who rightly sees himself as destitute before God, having no claim or power, but casting himself upon God's kind mercy.

"Mourning" (5:4) can refer generally to one's experience of grief and loss in this broken world. More specifically this also speaks to how the believer in God feels about one's sins, alluding to the great words of Isaiah 40:

> *"Comfort, comfort my people,"*
> *says your God.*
> *"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,*
> *and announce to her*
> *that her time of hard service is over,*
> *her iniquity has been pardoned,*
> *and she has received from the LORD's hand*
> *double for all her sins."*
>
> **ISAIAH 40:1-2**

These words are part of the great promise that God is going to send the Messiah who will restore God's kingdom and people on the earth (see the following verses in Isaiah 40:3-11 which are quoted in the New Testament).

In the third macarism, Jesus states plainly that the "blessed" (truly happy) ones are humble, recalling the consistent teaching in both testaments that God is opposed to the proud but resides with and exalts the humble (Isaiah 2:12; Psalm 31:23; Psalm 138:6; Proverbs 8:13; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5).

The fourth Beatitude concludes this first section by describing disciples as ones who **"hunger and thirst for righteousness"** (5:6). This can be read as a summary statement for how we are to live as Jesus's disciples in the world—looking to God, longing for Him to return and restore His good reign upon the earth. This is the normal sense of "righteousness" in the Bible—things being done rightly according to God's revelation. To hunger and thirst for righteousness means that we see the injustice, brokenness, and pain of this world and because our hearts are attuned to God we experience pangs of hunger and thirst. This is how Jesus will teach us to pray in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-15)—that the heavenly reality of God reigning fully will become our experience on earth as well.

As with all of Jesus's Beatitudes, He not only offers the statement of what the *shalom* life looks like, but He also provides a corresponding reason in the second half of the saying why His statement is true. He not only declares the goodness of poverty of spirit but also explains that this posture is accompanied by a further blessing from God, "For the kingdom of heaven is theirs." So too, the mourners will be comforted and the humble will inherit the earth. Those hungering for God's righteousness to be restored on the earth will have their mouths filled.

Be Attitudes

The Beatitudes present a compelling picture of what it means to thrive as a Christian. Identify these biblical examples of human beings living in a state of blessing:

Impoverished_____: Acts 3:6

Mournful _____: Luke 7:36-50

Humble_____: 1 Timothy 1:15

Hungry and thirsty_____: Luke 10:38-42

With which person do you most identify?

While these stories depict living examples of each of the Beatitudes, keep in mind Jesus shared the Beatitudes as a composite picture and we can also assume that these followers of Christ were well-rounded, displaying not just one of these traits but all of them, at least some of the time.

Which example challenges you the most?

These follow-up statements are the explanation for why the crazy-sounding definition of happiness Jesus just gave actually makes sense from a divine perspective. While Jesus's explanation of true happiness is not at all what we would expect (or initially desire), we can embrace His paradoxical way of living with the faith that God will be present with us and meet our desires and needs even in the midst of our humble state.

The Happy Life in Relationship to Others

MATTHEW 5:7-12

In this second half of the Beatitudes, **Jesus shifts from our posture toward God to our attitude and habits toward our fellow humans**. This is a typical pairing throughout the Bible, as in the two parts of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) and in the first and second greatest commandments (Matthew 22:34-40). We are fundamentally relational beings, so we need to learn to relate in life-giving ways to both our Creator and fellow creatures.

> *Blessed are the merciful,*
> *for they will be shown mercy.*
> *Blessed are the pure in heart,*
> *for they will see God.*
> *Blessed are the peacemakers,*
> *for they will be called sons of God.*
> **MATTHEW 5:7-9**

The first three Beatitudes in this section invite us to find true happiness by living in relationships of mercy, love, and forgiveness toward others. This is seen most clearly in verses 7 and 9. Jesus tells us when our lives are marked by being merciful, we will experience mercy from God as well as others. This circle of mercy giving and receiving creates a thick web of meaningful relationships and thereby goodness in life. Likewise, being a peacemaker does not refer in the abstract to pacifism or world peace, as beneficial as these things might be at times. Being a peacemaker speaks to how we habitually relate to others, especially when conflicts, hurts, and tensions arise. Christ's disciples are the ones who seek reconciliation, making peace rather than bringing heat and anger to moments of interpersonal skirmishes.

This theme of mercy and peacemaking can be found both deep and wide in Jesus's teachings in Matthew. Indeed, in Matthew the primary moral characteristic that Jesus calls His disciples to embody is found in an overlapping cluster of ideas—mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. Mercy is a rich idea biblically that has two sides in Matthew—mercy as compassion on those in need and who are suffering (regardless of whether this is their own fault or not) and mercy as forgiving others who have wronged us.

In addition to Matthew 5:7-9, this matrix of themes of mercy, compassion, and forgiveness occurs repeatedly. In Matthew 6 one of the spiritual practices to be done with a whole heart is giving alms or showing mercy to those in physical need (6:1-4), the opposite of which is the harsh judging that is condemned in 7:1-5. Jesus places great weight on showing compassion to others in need as highlighted twice with Matthew's strategic use of Hosea 6:6 (Matthew 9:13; 12:7)—"I desire mercy/compassion, not sacrifice." Closely related, Matthew regularly emphasizes that Jesus had compassion toward others in both emotion and action.

Five times in Matthew, Jesus is described as being full of compassion (directly in 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; indirectly in 18:27). This is what motivates Him to heal people of all kinds of diseases and afflictions. By way of contrast, Jesus's conflict with His self-appointed enemies, the scribes and Pharisees, often centers on their lack of compassion for others (12:1-14; 23:4,23). Jesus regularly commands His disciples to show mercy (9:13; 12:7; 23:23; 18:21-35; 25:31-46) and He models it (9:27-31; 15:21-28; 17:14-18; 20:29-34). Also connected, Jesus repeatedly speaks of the necessity and beauty of forgiving other people who have sinned against us, often tying this to receiving forgiveness from God Himself (6:14-15; 18:15-20,35). Forgiveness toward those who have wronged us is central to being a disciple of Jesus because it is living in the way that God Himself does (5:45). Those who live in these ways of mercy, compassion, and forgiveness "will be called sons of God" (5:9).

The Beatitude in Matthew 5:8 is in many ways the most central, but it is also easily misunderstood. "Purity of heart" on the English ear sounds as if Jesus is referring to moral purity, especially evocative of sexual purity. While the Scriptures do speak of the importance of sexual purity in plenty of places, the meaning here is different. *Purity* here **means wholeness or consistency**—purity in the way that a silver ingot is more or less pure silver. To the degree to which it is mixed with other metals, it is not pure sliver. Jesus's point here taps into the main theme of the Sermon overall—righteousness as wholeness, as consistency between our internal and

external lives. Specifically in the context of this triad of Beatitudes we understand Jesus exhorting us to lives of loyalty and integrity toward others, keeping purity in our relationships by not judging or condemning others (7:1-5). Because this is how God Himself is, with no shifting shadow in relation to us (James 1:17), Jesus promises that as we live in this kind of purity, we will see God Himself.

If we're not shocked yet by Jesus's topsy-turvy definitions of where to find true life, the last part of Jesus's Beatitudes will wake us up.

> *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. "You are blessed when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*
>
> **MATTHEW 5:10-12**

As we noted above, Matthew 5:10, which is the eighth macarism, is tied into the first one by repeating the phrase, "For the kingdom of heaven is theirs." This inclusio reminds us that **all of Jesus's teachings are an invitation into life in God's coming kingdom**. We can also observe that the central theme of the Sermon, righteousness, appears yet again. Just like the first set of four Beatitudes ends with longing for God's righteousness to come to the earth (5:6), now Jesus concludes the second set of four by speaking about what will happen when His disciples live in God's righteous ways—they will often experience unjust persecution, pain, and rejection. This is part of being kingdom citizens of heaven within a hostile earth.

This final message of the Beatitudes—that true happiness can be found even in the midst of unjust suffering—is doubly reinforced by Jesus's ninth and final macarism. This is the point of 5:11-12. Typical of many wisdom teachings in the ancient world, oftentimes a teacher would highlight the main point by expanding on the penultimate saying. That is, the eighth Beatitude wraps up the sequence with its repeated references to the kingdom and righteousness. Now the ninth Beatitude expands up this final one so that the most memorable takeaway is reiterated.

Jesus explains that His disciples will sooner or later experience the same things He did—insults, persecution, and false accusations. But contrary to our natural response, by faith we can learn to still experience flourishing and even joy. Why? Because **"your reward is great in heaven"** and we share in the communion of God's faithful prophets in the past (5:12).

Herein lies one of the most profound paradoxes of the Christian life—we can have genuine joy in the midst of suffering, rewards when it feels like loss, and life through death. Jesus models this in His own life and the New Testament authors return to this theme regularly (2 Corinthians 4:7-18; 1 Peter 1:3-12; James 1:2-18).

Life as Jesus's Priests in the World

MATTHEW 5:13-16

Jesus's teaching about salt and light is one of the many memorable sayings from the Sermon that has become influential, not only within the Church but in the broader world. But often such famous sayings are interpreted and applied without much knowledge of the context of the teaching. This is true of 5:13-16.

> *"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty? It's no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. "You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*
>
> **MATTHEW 5:13-16**

The first question is what these metaphors of "salt" and "light" mean. The short answer is that in the ancient world salt was used as analogy for a lot of different things. Light is also a widely used metaphor, especially in the Bible, but its meanings are more clearly defined. In the Bible, light often refers to God revealing Himself, which enables people to see. There is often a related moral sense, with light being connected to God and goodness in contrast with darkness.

If we pay attention to 5:13-15, we will see that Jesus puts these two metaphors in direct parallel with each other. These verses follow the same pattern. Jesus tells His disciples they are the "salt of the earth" which is paralleled with the "light of the world." This is followed by paired warnings to not let salt or light fail to meet their intended purposes. All of this shows we are supposed to interpret salt and light together, as mutually informing.

When we see the metaphors in parallel the meaning becomes clearer. **Salt and light are both images that connect to the role of priests in the Old Testament**—those who use salt in the making of covenants and who teach God's revelation. Jesus's point is that His disciples are now the priests and heralds of the new covenant God is making with the world through Jesus. As Jesus's disciples go into the world and shine the light of the gospel, through both word and deed, people will see God and (many) will glorify Him (5:16).

This is an incredible and weighty privilege. So why the warnings? Jesus ended His Beatitudes on a dark note—expect persecution, rejection, and suffering. In light of this unexpected and unpleasant prospect, Jesus must exhort His followers to remain faithful in the midst of hardship.

1. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods, with introduction by Thomas Merton (New York: Modern Library, 1950).

Oil Lamp
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ TOM HOOKE

Personal Reflection

Make a list of what you think would make you truly happy. How does this list compare to the things Jesus talks about in the Beatitudes?

From the first part of each Beatitude, consider the character traits that Jesus calls us to, such as humility, mercy, and peacemaking. Prayerfully examine your life and heart. Which of these do you see growing in your life? Which of these do you struggle with the most?

Persecution, fear, and suffering can tempt us to stop being salt and light in the world—to "lose our flavor" and to hide. Is there a situation in your life right now where fear is a more powerful factor than faithfulness in your witness?