

The Beatitudes: An Overview

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Beatitudes Project Art Card" by Stu Garrard

Prayer of Illumination

Almighty God, in you are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Open our eyes that we may see the wonders of your Word; and give us grace that we may clearly understand and freely choose the way of your wisdom; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Background

At the end of Matthew 4, Jesus's fame was taking the nation by storm. The synagogues were packed to hear his preaching on the good news of the kingdom. He healed every disease, sickness, pain, and spiritual torment among the people. Crowds followed him everywhere.

But then he stopped. And Jesus decided to take a hike up a mountain. He paused the healing button, and began teaching to both the inner-circle of the disciples and the outer-circle of the crowds. And did the Rabbi ever teach! The world would never be the same after his Sermon on the Mount.

The good news is that Jesus is still teaching today. So let's ascend with the disciples to hear his words again. Let's go with the crowds and risk twisted ankles, sun exposure, and exhaustion. Let's listen for a challenging word, that pokes and prods. Let's soak in the greatest spiritual teaching ever uttered.

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12 (NRSVue) – The Beatitudes

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – “The Beatitudes: An Overview”

In Rebekah Eklund’s new landmark study *“The Beatitudes through the Ages,”* she shares about the profound influence of the Beatitudes upon the world over the centuries.

In the mid-1800s the Chinese rebel Hong Xiuchuan (pronounced *Hong Shee-awn*) led the Taiping Rebellion. What’s fascinating is that he was inspired by the Beatitudes and the Gospel of Matthew. He named his kingdom Taiping Tianguo, which in English is “The Great Peace Kingdom of Heaven.” After Hong Xiuchuan (*Hong Shee-awn*) conquered the city of Nanking, he erected a Monument of the Beatitudes inscribed with Christ’s eight blessings. The reason he gave for commissioning this monument was to make known “the blessings Jesus announced in the Sermon on the Mount had now been fulfilled in his kingdom.”

The beatitudes’ influence is all around us, whether we know it or not. The proverb, “patience is a virtue” comes from a poem about the Beatitudes. You can find the Beatitudes in Nobel Peace Prize speeches, in political debates, and discussions about ethics, justice, and theology over the millennia. Many say the Beatitudes are the most influential spiritual teaching ever uttered. It’s not only for every Christian, but anybody, no matter your creed, culture, or country.

The Beatitudes of Jesus shape not only the world, but the church. They’re at the very heart of Christianity. Some have said the Beatitudes are a portrait of Jesus, others call it the perfect summation and distillation of Christ’s teachings. Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, and Pentecostals all agree on this: Jesus perfectly embodied the Beatitudes. He didn’t just teach them, he lived them. And if we claim to follow Christ as Christians, and if the Spirit of Christ resides in us, and if we believe we the church are the Body of Christ, the Beatitudes will also describe Jesus’ disciples – us.

Author Kurt Vonnegut asked this pointed and sarcastic question of Christians:

“You want the 10 Commandments posted in public places, but why don’t you want the 8 Beatitudes plastered everywhere?”

Maybe we don’t because deep down we know the Beatitudes are subversive to our assumptions about Christ and culture – turning them upside down and inside out. Sometimes in my more cynical moments, I wonder if the church in America really took these eight blessings seriously, *would we be even recognizable?*

We need to rediscover the Beatitudes. We need to go back to our roots in church history and be baptized in the Beatitudes again.

- Many baptismal fonts are octagonal in shape (*including ours at Immanuel*) and on some of them, a beatitude is inscribed on each side. This tradition goes back to the early church father **Gregory of Nyssa**.
- Augustine’s mentor **Ambrose** likened the Beatitudes to a ladder or ascending steps leading to the Kingdom of Heaven.
- **St. Augustine** described the Beatitudes as *“the perfect pattern of the Christian life.”*

- **Martin Luther** later wrote during the Reformation that the Beatitudes teach us how to live out the Great Commandment: to love God and love our neighbor.
- **John Calvin** called them “the school of the cross” and they train us for action in favor of others, not ourselves.



These eight blessings are both gift and task. Grace first, then gratitude. God gave us mercy, so we could be merciful to others. The “attitude of Beatitude” happens when the Spirit of Christ is poured into our lives and we daily allow him to lead and guide us. Our old prideful self is crucified, and Christ rises to life in us. Christ increases and we decrease. We bear the fruit of the Spirit. Believers today continue to be blessed by the living benedictions of the beatitudes.

I learned this week my brother-in-law Jay had a powerful faith encounter reading the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. He had some experiences here and there in the church growing up, but at age 21 he met some friends who were practicing Christians. They got his attention. He prayed, “God, if you’re real, I’m all in.” So he decided to start reading the Scriptures and began with the Gospel of Matthew. After getting to chapter five and reading the Beatitudes, Jay was struck that these could not be mere human words. They were divine, life-giving words. As he read, God became real to him. His prayer was answered. And ever since that day, Jay’s been all in, whether serving Christ in distant lands, or helping care for my dad while he’s in hospice. That’s the Jesus way.

What sets apart the Beatitudes is that they’re about an entirely different kind of kingdom from all kingdoms that ever existed. Jesus’ words turn the world’s standards and values on their head.

- ☆ Blessed are the poor in spirit and those persecuted for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
- ☆ Blessed are those that mourn for they will be comforted.

Jesus' MO is totally different from the world's MO – a total reversal. He blesses broken people, he doesn't step on them. When we're empty, God wants to fill us up, not dispose of us. And so, the Beatitudes are the Magna Carta of the Kingdom. The Manifesto of the King. The very essence of Jesus' teachings. The opening of the heart and mind of Jesus.

You could say the Sermon on the Mount is the Beginner's Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. These eight blessings are paradoxical, inspiring, challenging, counterintuitive, countercultural, comforting, and uncomfortable. They'll lovingly mess with your assumptions and your politics – no matter what party or political system you prescribe too. They will rock your boat and rock our world!

Dieterich Bonhoeffer wrote in the 1930s and 40s that the Beatitudes were opposed to and incompatible with the German national church under the Nazi regime. Like Christ, he was executed for living by the Beatitudes and Christ. Despite the costs of discipleship, living into the Beatitudes will give off the fragrance of Christ, which is life – even in our dying. We'll emit a pleasing aroma of the unexpected and surprising happiness of living God's way.

We get the word "Beatitude" from Jerome's Latin Vulgate. But in the original language of the New Testament (Greek), the word is *makarios* which means "blessed." It can also be translated: *happy, flourishing, fortunate, praiseworthy, or blissful*. I personally prefer "blessed." You can pick which one you like.

So what does it mean to be blessed? It means having a heart at rest, harmonious, peaceful, trusting, and content, without being complacent – no matter the circumstances. We're blessed by God's provision in our poverty. We're blessed to be a blessing to others – we don't keep it to ourselves.

The Beatitudes contain multitudes: They encourage, command, warn, and decree. They're an invitation to participation in the life of Christ. And so we're walking oxymorons Immanuel. If you want to be truly happy, truly blessed, truly fulfilled, you'll be: poor in spirit, humble, merciful, pure in heart, and a peacemaker. By the Messiah's mercy, you'll find yourself truly living the gospel – in your family, in the church, and in society. You'll be more and more spiritually and emotionally mature – childlike and free, dependent upon God and truly human. You'll look and act, by the grace of God, a lot like Jesus. You of course won't be perfect – that's only in heaven. We haven't arrived—yet. But we'll continue exploring and scouting out these next few weeks the Kingdom of Heaven, here on earth.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "Beatitudes Project Art Card" by [Stu Garrard](#)

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