

Wisdom of the Bible ~ The Beatitudes ~ Leader's Guide

Note: Much of the discussion below is taken or adapted from Kenneth E. Bailey's excellent book, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* published by IVP Academic.

2. 1st Beatitude. What does Jesus mean by "poor in spirit?" (Matt 5:5, Isaiah 66:2)

Jesus borrows his language from Isaiah 66:2, the second part of which reads "But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word." [NKJV] So Jesus is speaking of a humble and pious person who knows he needs God's grace and who "trembles" at his word. Jesus goes on to affirm that these bless-ed ones make up the membership of the kingdom of heaven, which is already theirs. As mentioned, the second line is not a reward for the first line, rather the poor in spirit already possess the kingdom of heaven.

3. 2nd Beatitude. If there is mourning, some kind of suffering lies behind it. Does this beatitude mean that Christians should seek out suffering? Should we rejoice in sickness, disasters, persecution, pain, and death? (Matt 5:6, Ecclesiastes 7:2-4)

Christians are never urged to seek suffering; they are, however, encouraged to recognize that suffering is an extraordinary teacher. Mourners endure suffering and the bless-ed ones among them experience the comfort of God. Suffering can become a doorway to profound wisdom.

At a funeral where friends speak of remembered courage, faith, loyalty, love, and vision of the one who died, for those in attendance, this shared mourning can "make the heart glad." (Eccl 7:3).

The righteous and bless-ed also mourn when they see people treated unjustly. They empathize and suffer with them. But this Beatitude also calls upon the faithful to mourn over evil in their *own* lives as they realize their inability to conquer it unaided. The righteous mourn over their own sins and are comforted.

4. 3rd Beatitude. Who are the meek? (Matt 5:5, Psalm 37:11, Zephaniah 3:12)

The Aramaic (Hebrew) word probably used by Jesus and the Greek word in the NT have different emphases. Each offers nuances that enhance the text.

Aristotle defines the Greek term, *prays*, as the virtue of acting halfway between recklessness on one side and cowardice on the other. For Aristotle, the path of virtue was always the "golden mean" between two extremes. On the other hand, the Hebrew meaning of the word tells us to accept the guidance of God and obediently follow God's will. So the Greek word advises an ethical, median way to work out our problems while the Hebrew word advises us to seek the will of God. The "meek" in this Beatitude are those who humbly seek God. They are neither too bold nor too timid.

5. 4th Beatitude. Righteousness itself is like a diamond with many facets and we could spend weeks discussing its meaning. But our question today is: why does Jesus focus on those who *seek* righteousness rather than those who *are* righteous? (Matt 5:6, Matt 13:44-46)

Jesus did not say, “Blessed are those who live righteously and maintain a righteous lifestyle.” Rather he affirms, “Blessed are those who *hunger and thirst* after righteousness. The statement presupposes that righteousness is something the faithful continuously strive after. The blessed are not those who arrive but those who continue, at whatever cost, in their pilgrimage toward a more perfect righteousness. The constant, relentless drive toward righteousness characterizes the blessed.

Matthew 13:44-46 includes a pair of parables that illuminate this Beatitude. The first one likens the kingdom of heaven to a man who finds a treasure in a field and sells everything and buys that field. The second parable compares that same kingdom to a merchant searching for a pearl of great price. Contrary to popular perception, in this latter case the kingdom is not compared to the pearl but to the merchant, *who is searching for it*. The Beatitude we are now examining is like the second of these two parables. Believers who *hunger and thirst* after righteousness are called blessed in that striving.

6. 5th Beatitude. “Showing mercy” has two basic meanings: _____ and _____.

Most study Bibles don’t even include a note on this Beatitude perhaps feeling that it is so obvious what Jesus meant by it. But is it?

The first meaning has to do with *compassion* and is composed of feelings and actions. The father in the story of the prodigal son “had compassion” and “ran.” His merciful feelings translated into dramatic actions. Again and again Jesus is described as having compassion for the needy around him (Matt 9:36, 14:14, 18:27, Mark 1:41, 6:34, Luke 7:13, 10:33). At times the feelings are not mentioned and only the compassionate action is recorded. To respond to human need with compassion and action is at the core of what being merciful is all about.

Second, to be merciful and obtain mercy are profoundly related to *forgiving* and being forgiven. There is so much on this subject that we will not delve into its depths here, only to say that showing mercy is related to forgiveness and God’s forgiveness of us is related to our forgiveness of others.

7. 6th Beatitude. Does “pure in heart” mean having a) one single focus and motive, i.e., no hidden agenda, b) internal purity, i.e., clean thoughts, no hate, no smut, or c) open transparency to God and others, i.e., what you see is what you get?

In a sense being pure in heart means all of these things. The *heart* in the Hebrew mind and in the Bible included the entire *interior* life of the person. And

although Rabbinic tradition put major emphasis on external purity and cleanliness, Jesus put his entire emphasis on purity of heart, i.e., the interior life including feelings and mind. The bless-ed exhibit purity in all aspects of their interior world: oneness of focus and vision, purity of thought, and transparency and openness.

8. 7th Beatitude. Are the “peacemakers” those who a) are peaceful, b) are pacifists, c) are mediators, d) don’t understand God’s peace. (Philippians 4:7)

We often think of peace as the absence of war or the cessation of violence. But peace in the Bible includes the finest loving relationships between individuals, within families, communities, and nations. The peace in this Beatitude is primarily the peace of God which includes all of the above and “passes all understanding.” The word *peacemaker* appears only here in the entire Bible. As far as our question goes, the one who is bless-ed in this Beatitude is not (a) the peaceful, (b) the pacifist, or (d) one who does not understand; it is the person who is doing something to bring about peace—(c) the peacemaker and the mediator.

9. 8th Beatitude. Does this verse mean (Matt 5:10) being persecuted for a) doing what is right, b) standing up for justice, c) striving for ethical perfection, d) promoting God’s word, e) something else _____ ?

Righteousness is a huge word that includes many things such as God’s saving acts in history, acceptance in the presence of God, a lifestyle that maintains a relationship with God, i.e., being at one with God. Those who find themselves despised, rejected, and persecuted because they speak about and promote such things can legitimately claim they are “persecuted for righteousness sake” and that the kingdom is theirs.

10. 9th Beatitude. This is the first Beatitude in which Jesus has inserted himself (*on my account, because of me*) and added some explanation. Why did he do this?

This Beatitude has seven phrases, an opening line, two negative statements, a reference to Jesus, two positive statements, and a closing line. This ancient Jewish pattern of writing was well-known to Jesus’ listeners and Matthew’s readers.

A critical shift has now taken place in the Beatitudes. Up to this point all of them can be explained out of the Hebrew scriptures. Yet something has been creeping up on the reader. These eight lofty standards have their finest expression in the life of Jesus. But in the ninth Beatitude loyalty to the person of Jesus is openly introduced.

So while Jesus is the model for all the Beatitudes, he “walks on stage” for the first time in the final Beatitude—on persecution for his sake. Those so persecuted can rejoice in having joined the prophetic fellowship of suffering.