

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes. But they are so much more than an introduction. They are a sober—yet dazzling—vision of the operation of the kingdom of heaven among God’s people. The Beatitudes summarize the essence of Jesus’ message. Here Jesus idealizes the intersection of the kingdom and the lives of those who live under His rule and reign as King.

The character of kingdom life undermines the values that most people hold dear—then and now. God’s blessings appear in some unlikely places. The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful—these are the ones who can see God’s blessings. And in this way, the Beatitudes reveal an upside-down reality. They are counter-cultural. True life—found in the kingdom—is not the usual order of things. The priorities of our world don’t reflect God’s best for us.

We all want to be blessed. We may even pray that God would bless us. But the question is, what does this mean? Maybe it means a new job, a new spouse, or just a day off. We want health, wealth, and happiness. We want to compete and win. We want to be appreciated or make our opinion heard. And we pursue such things with reckless abandon. We think we know what is best for us.

But Jesus has us thinking about *blessing* in a whole different way. The Greek word here is actually translated well—*blessed*. Some have rendered it as *happy* or *fulfilled* or *fortunate*. But I think the somewhat ambiguous English *blessed* is still the best term to describe Jesus’ statements. And now we let Jesus drive what He means by this term.

As we read Jesus’ usage, we start to see that *blessed* is a state of existence in right relationship with God. And this means that we can be *blessed* by God even if we don’t feel *happy* or *fulfilled* or *fortunate*.

This isn’t even about having the right attitude. The term *beatitude* might make us think that way. But God doesn’t just tell us to live a life worthy of blessing—and then bless those who do.

I am all for having right attitudes. And the Beatitudes do call us to think a certain way about the things going on in our lives. But there is also something more. The Beatitudes acknowledge the ones indicated—the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness—are actually blessed.

And this means a lack of positivity, negative feelings, the absence of feelings—and especially the difficulties of life—cannot take away the blessedness of those who exist in right relationship with God. Blessings might not look like blessings to us. They might even be difficult or frustrating. But our blessedness is real and secure—and it is eternal—as we will see.

Now, we have heard this reading before. In fact, this is one that comes up at least once a year in our lectionary. On typical feast days, the readings stay the same from year to year—even though we use the historic *three-year* lectionary. And that allows us to dig into this passage with more depth. We have the privilege of giving our attention to the details. And this is what Matthew—and Jesus—intend.

The Bible isn't a book you read once and put away. It is meant to be read with ever-growing depth. And it gives more each time you read. C.S. Lewis once said, "To me, re-reading my favorite books is like spending time with my best friends. I'd never be satisfied to limit myself to just one experience each with my favorite people." This is true of lots of good books, but it is especially true of the Scriptures.

Each Beatitude is composed of two poetic clauses. The first clause identifies the blessing and the blessed one. The second reveals the cause of the blessing—the reason for what precedes it. In Hebrew poetry, this is synthetic parallelism—the second line completes the thought of the first. And Jesus begins with the Psalms in mind—even the very first Psalm. You could even say that this is His Sermon text.

The Psalmist says, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night."

There are eight primary statements in our reading that follow this pattern. Then there is a final and climactic ninth statement. It serves as an extension and a personalization of the previous eight. This is especially for His disciples that experience persecution because they live under the rule and reign of Christ—and in the kingdom of God.

This overall structure gives an important clue to the main theme. The first and eighth Beatitudes share a final causal clause, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The ninth Beatitude also picks up on this theme. Notice the present tense. The kingdom of heaven isn't just about the future. Rather the kingdom of heaven is a present possession for these followers of Christ. It operates among those who rely on Christ for His blessings.

Now, all the other Beatitudes—between the first and eighth—namely, the second through seventh—are in the future tense. And it means that although the kingdom is present with the Word and ministry of Jesus—there are realities—promises—that are yet future—for them and for us.

Given this structure—and these details—I would like us to give our attention to one specific Beatitude—the seventh, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." And this beatitude builds nicely on our Epistle reading today from 1 John as John says, "Beloved, we are God's children now."

The theme of peace permeates the Scriptures. And it is more than just the absence of conflict. Peace *is* the opposite of division and separation. It is about reconciliation and forgiveness. But it also indicates completeness and wholeness—life as God has designed it. And it means that the quality of life that God gives us because of Jesus Christ—and that He will give us in Jesus Christ. And that kind of peace pours out of us into others—even as it pours into eternity.

The Zealots in Jesus day attempted to bring self-rule back to Judea through insurrection and violence. The Religious leaders brought even more division through greed, selfishness, and misguided loyalties. The Romans brought peace with conquering might and the edge of the sword. But the true peacemakers are those who embrace and announce a particular piece of good news—namely, the kingdom of heaven—the rule and reign of Christ.

I like the way Isaiah says it, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”

Peace has messianic overtones. Jesus is the Prince of Peace in Isaiah 9. And the true peacemakers are those who wait and work for Christ. They live in the reality that the kingdom of heaven brings. They are merciful—as the fifth Beatitude suggests.

They have no need for conflict—they don’t always need to be right or first or even noticed. They don’t have to win. Christ is the true Conqueror. He is the Victorious One. And in His victory, He makes whole the divisions we have created for ourselves. He brings grace and it pours out of us into relationships of peace—without fighting or arguing or quarreling—without anger, resentment or expectations.

And there is a blessing here for people of peace—even a cause for our peacemaking, “for they shall be called sons of God.” It is not lost on us that Jesus is the only true Son of God. And that we are sons of God—children of God—only in Christ—only through His work of redemption and reconciliation. Because of sin, we have to be adopted into the family of God through faith—and through Baptism.

But for the peacemakers, there is this grand promise for the end. It is an eternal promise. Remember we are in the future tense here. Those who have waited for God’s messianic peace can now respond to Jesus’ gracious invitation. And at the end, they will have peace with God—welcomed home as prodigal sons who come back to receive what only He can give. What a wonderful place to be. Received as God’s children forever. No more division between us and God. No more sin to bring conflict and anger. We will no longer question God’s goodness or His plan. We will spend eternity in right relationship with Him—in trust—as adopted—chosen—sons and daughters.

God’s promises—all of them that we find in these nine beatitudes—are trustworthy. They should permeate our thinking and conversations. In faith and hope, we are heirs of the kingdom of heaven. And we reflect the character of Jesus Christ. We become like the One we worship. He is the Prince of Peace.

And by His call, we too are peacemakers. He fulfills His office perfectly. We reflect Him imperfectly while we rely on His perfection. But because we have peace with God—because we have His promise—because He rules and reigns over all things—we are set free from division, chaos, anger, resentment, and unforgiveness. And so, we carry Jesus’ mission of peacemaking out into the world—especially in our families and church family.

Now perhaps we read these Beatitudes and we think, “I could never be like that.” They are simply too demanding. Or perhaps we have no desire to be meek or merciful or peacemaking. We like who we are. We were fighting in the car ride here—we will pick up that fight on the way home. We have this compulsive need to be right—or to be heard—or to get our way. Negative attention is somehow better in our minds than no attention at all.

And we have no intention of being pure in heart. We hunger and thirst for a bunch of things—but none of them look remotely like righteousness. Maybe we fully intend to walk out of here with same countervalues that we have always held—that our friends and neighbors hold—rather than embrace the values of Jesus. And I suppose you can do that if you really want to.

But there is another way. There is the life that Jesus gives—and then Jesus blesses—the life He has for His people for all eternity. The Beatitudes are neither a means of entering nor of advancing the kingdom of heaven. Let's not think of ourselves so highly when it comes to spiritual things.

Instead, they are an expression of the Spirit-produced life. Jesus' Word creates in us what He proclaims. He recreates us in His own image. He makes us His people. And He gives us hope. Our role is simply to stop resisting the work of the Spirit. It is all actually very passive. It is a life we receive. We simply give ourselves over to His working. And it begins with listening.

I mentioned the first Psalm earlier. And I really do think this is something of a key to understanding the Beatitudes. The Psalmist is saying that we should be careful where we walk and stand and sit—and really this is about who we allow to form our identity and values and habits.

But then notice the blessing for us when we delight in the Word of God. We don't just sing hymns mindlessly—or daydream silently in the pew. We don't walk out and forget everything—going back to what everyone else is doing—glad church is over so we can get to brunch and gossip.

Instead, we give ourselves over to that Word—day and night. The Word of God is our obsession—our light—our treasure. The word *meditate* in Hebrew—in Psalm 1—is something done out loud. No one read silently in the ancient world. It was always out loud. And so, meditation is talking about what we hear here with others.

But meditation has also been compared to eating very slowly—chewing every bite carefully—getting everything we can out of those tootsie rolls we took from our children's trick or treat stash. This is how we handle the Word of God. We give it our careful attention. We meditate on it day and night. And when it is our own—it messes with us—it gives what it commands—it grants His blessings.

So, let me invite you to hear the words of Jesus Christ—in the Sermon on the Mount—in the Beatitudes—in this way. Don't resist them. Mediate upon them. And see if they won't work the values of Jesus Christ into your heart and mind and life. And may it begin with the Beatitude we gave our attention today, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+*Soli Deo Gloria*+