

**Commentary on the Beatitudes**  
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The familiarity of the beatitudes presents the preacher with a challenge.

Our hearers may have pre-conceived ideas of what they are about, or skepticism of our ability to say anything fresh about them. The beatitudes are pervasive in popular culture, from politics to pop psychology. The spirit and religion message board on "Oprah.com" suggests that it might be enlightening "if we could each of us look within ourselves" and "pick one [beatitude] that showed us who we believed ourselves to be." If we look carefully at Jesus' words, however, we find that they are much more than moral platitudes or mottos to live by.

### **Context**

The beatitudes introduce the Sermon on the Mount, a collection of Jesus' teachings. Matthew places the Sermon at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, emphasizing that Jesus is the authoritative teacher of God's people. Jesus breaks into the public arena proclaiming, "repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). He calls his first disciples from the task of fishing for fish to the task of fishing for people (verses 18-22).

Then, he shows the disciples just what this new kind of fishing looks like by preaching the good news of the kingdom of heaven to people and manifesting its power by healing every kind of disease and affliction (verses 23-25). The presence of this kingdom of heaven liberates. Then, Jesus climbs a mountain with the crowd he has so excited and sits down in the posture of a teacher encircled by his newly-called disciples. They are the primary targets of his instruction in the principles of life in the kingdom of heaven.

### **Content**

A key principle of embracing this life is "blessedness." This is a refrain that runs throughout verses 5-10: those are blessed who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are persecuted. The word "blessed" does not mean "holy," and neither does it mean "happy" in the sense of being in a good mood. Rather, the word, "blessed" refers to a fortunate state of life. Jesus is saying that those who are poor in spirit are fortunate! It may surprise us that he speaks these words about those whose present circumstances seem so unfortunate.

Jesus can speak such words because he is revealing a kingdom perspective. The first and the last of the nine beatitudes extend his proclamation of the good news by applying the presence of the kingdom of heaven to the poor and persecuted (verses 3, 10). These beatitudes act like bookends for the rest of them, indicating that the kingdom of heaven is the controlling concept of the section. It is so because those who possess the kingdom are "blessed." "Blessed are the poor in spirit, *for* theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (verse 3). "Blessed are those who are persecuted... *for* theirs is the kingdom of heaven (verse 10).

The verbs in these two verses are in the present tense: "theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom that Jesus proclaims infiltrates the present condition of the unfortunate and transforms it. Jesus had begun his public ministry announcing that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Later, when Jesus sends his disciples out to preach and heal, he tells them to make the same announcement as they go (10:1, 5-8). The kingdom of heaven breaks into the world with the words and work of Jesus.

The present conditions of the unfortunate are variations on the same theme. The language of each beatitude reflects Old Testament language: Those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, and who hunger and thirst for righteousness suffer because of their faithfulness to God, and they trust in God to vindicate them (Isaiah 61:1-2; Psalm 24:3-4; Psalm 37, especially verse 11; 42:1-2). While those who oppress God's people may be fortunate for a moment, they who trust the Lord will be fortunate forever. Jesus calls those who would be his followers to the same radical commitment and hope.

After listing the beatitudes, Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely *on my account*" (verse 12). The kingdom of heaven belongs to those who suffer because of their faithfulness to Jesus. But Jesus is also calling them to follow his own way, since he himself will suffer for his faithfulness to God, trusting that God will vindicate him.

While Jesus affirms the present experience of the kingdom of heaven in verses 3 and 10, he promises future vindication for the unfortunate in verses 4-9. While the verbs in the second half of the beatitudes in verses 3 and 10 are in the present tense, the verbs in the second half of the beatitudes verses 4-9 are in the future tense.

The promise of future vindication does not mean, however, that the focus is entirely future. Jesus insists that God has the final word, bringing assurance into the present. This is why he can say, "Blessed *are* those who mourn...blessed *are* the meek...blessed *are* those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...blessed *are* the merciful...blessed *are* the pure in heart...blessed *are* the peacemakers." Jesus gives his followers eyes to see that the future is certain and this transforms the present.

### **Claim**

Jesus calls us to join a radical kingdom. He gives us a radical vision to match, that the kingdom of heaven infiltrates our present. We can continue fishing for people, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom at great cost to ourselves, fighting oppressive powers in Jesus' name. We can suffer for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, with the assurance that God has the last word. When we see people receiving the word of God, and finding healing and freedom in Jesus' name we can announce, "the kingdom of heaven has drawn near."

*[[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=863](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=863) accessed 12 August 2019]*