

# WHAT ARE THE BEATITUDES?

The word *beatitude* comes from a Latin word (*beatus*) that means “happy” or “blessed.” So the word *beatitude* is about some happiness or blessedness. What does it mean to be happy or blessed? The answer to this question is found in the context of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5.

The Beatitudes are the first part of Jesus’ teachings called the Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew 5:1–7:29). In Matthew 4:17 Jesus began his ministry by announcing the coming of the kingdom of heaven: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” In Matthew 4:23–25, Jesus healed the sick throughout Galilee. This healing was a demonstration of the coming kingdom of heaven, of the fulfillment of God’s promises through his prophets in the Old Testament. The teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, then, are descriptions and instructions for those living in the kingdom of heaven.

The Beatitudes are not imperatives; they are not commands the believer must fulfill to enter the kingdom of God. Rather, they are results of the coming of this kingdom. They are part of the Gospel, the good news that Jesus, the Messiah, has come. The good news is that God was about to intervene decisively in history and produce people like the ones described in the Sermon on the Mount.

## Kingdom of God/Heaven

The expression “kingdom of heaven” only occurs in the Gospel according to Matthew. Why? Because the Gospel of Matthew appears to have been for a Jewish audience, Matthew avoids using the name of God—out of respect, Jews avoid pronouncing God’s name.

- The idea of the kingdom uses an important metaphor in the Old Testament: God is King (Psalm 47:7). Kings in the ancient world had absolute power over their dominions. However, they also had responsibilities toward their subjects. Kings were supposed to:
  - Provide protection for their territories and the people in them
  - Provide for the needs of their subjects
  - Maintain order in the kingdom, especially legal order
  - Represent the deity (in the Old Testament, God)—the king stood for God, representing his authority to the people

# BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT, FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

—Matthew 5:3

## MEANING

The “poor in spirit” are those who recognize their need for God in all things. Like the poor and destitute who depend on others, the poor in spirit know that only God can save and protect them.

What the WORLD Says	What JESUS Says
The world and every kind of human-made religion value the “spiritual master,” the guru, the great teacher. The idea is that if you know and do the right things, you can find your own spiritual salvation. People have their own answers to their problems, if they could only recognize it.	Jesus tells us that the opposite is true. The truly happy people are those who have recognized they are spiritually bankrupt before God. Their happiness consists in relying on God’s strength because they know he cannot fail, and having the certainty that in the kingdom of God, the Messiah will be fully in charge (Isaiah 29:19).

## RELATED TEXTS

“Once more the humble will rejoice in the Lord...”  
(Isaiah 29:19). See also: Luke 6:20; Matthew 18:4; Isaiah 61:1.

## QUESTIONS

In what areas of your life are you trying to make it on your own, instead of asking God for help?

## Now and Future Kingdom

- In the New Testament, the kingdom of heaven is God’s gracious rule. In other words, it is where God’s will is done. The gospels make it clear that the kingdom was a present experience (Luke 11:20, 17:21). Jesus’ miracles, teachings, and ministry are all manifestations of the kingdom.
- Yet, the rest of the New Testament, the apostolic letters, makes it also clear that the kingdom is a reality in the future. That is, the fullness of the kingdom will only be experienced when Jesus comes back at the end of times.
- Some theologians call these two realities about the kingdom of heaven the “already-not yet.” The kingdom of heaven and the promises within it are *already* part of the church’s experience. However, the fullness of the kingdom’s power and influence is *not yet* experienced. Christ will bring about the fullness of the kingdom in his second coming.



# BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN, FOR THEY WILL BE COMFORTED.

—Matthew 5:4

## MEANING

“Those who mourn” refers to people wishing God to send his Messiah, hoping God will restore his kingdom and set the world right. Isaiah 61:2–3 tells of the coming Messiah who will “comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion”. These are people who understand the mess the world is in and wish for God’s redemption. Their comfort consists in knowing that the Messiah has come and the redemption they have hoped for is about to occur!

What the WORLD Says	What JESUS Says
Today we avoid grief and pain. “How can a mournful person be happy?” The pursuit of happiness has become for us a goal above all goals. We have become very adept to hiding from pain and reality. Nothing is solved, but we can continue to pretend to be happy.	In stark contrast, Jesus asserts that the way to true happiness must come through a radical shift in thought, a change of mind that first makes us see ourselves as we really are—and our world as it really is—and mourn. Only after we recognize this sorrow can God comfort us. Knowing that the Messiah has come and offers redemption is the greatest comfort for those who mourn.

## RELATED TEXTS

“As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you...”  
(Isaiah 66:13).

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me” (John 14:1).

“I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy” (John 16:20).

“For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:17).  
See also: Isaiah 61:2; John 16:7.

## QUESTIONS

Ask God to show you things in your life to which you may be insensitive. Remember that the Lord will always be with you, comforting you through this painful process. If there are areas in your life that need changing, ask God to redeem them.

# BLESSED ARE THE MEEK, FOR THEY WILL INHERIT THE EARTH.

—Matthew 5:5

## MEANING

This beatitude alludes to Psalm 37:11: “But the meek will inherit the land...” The Psalm is comparing the “evil” and “wicked” with the meek. In fact, Psalm 37:3, 5 seem to define what the psalmist means by the meek, “Trust in the Lord and do good.... Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him....” The prophet Zephaniah uses the same expression during a prophetic oracle of judgment: “...because I will remove from this city those who rejoice in their pride... But I will leave within you the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the Lord” (Zephaniah 3:11–12).

In addition, the word *meek* is an important adjective in the Bible. It is used to describe Moses in Numbers 12:3, and usually translated as “humble.” Jesus describes himself with the same word in Matthew 11:29, “...for I am gentle and humble in heart....” The third Beatitude, then, refers to the meekness necessary to trust in God. It also refers to the attitude of God’s servant: the meekness to serve God and do his will above our own.

What the WORLD Says	What JESUS Says
It is the proud and strong who will inherit the earth. Only the mighty have the power to seize the prize of ruling the planet. Only those who are clever and confident in themselves and their abilities have any hope of holding on to authority and dominion. “Nice guys finish last” describes this attitude that gentleness never gets you anywhere.	Although it may appear that meekness is a disadvantage according to the values of this world, it is a wonderful thing in the values of God. It is God’s invitation to trust in him, to have the certainty that his plans and work will accomplish what he promised.

Old Testament prophets communicated God’s promise to restore the land to Israel. This promise was taken to be limited to the land that God originally promised to Abraham. But in the New Testament, the promise is extended. It is a promise for “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1, 2 Peter 3:13). It is the new heaven and new earth that the meek will inherit.



## RELATED TEXTS

"For the Lord takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with salvation" (Psalm 149:4).

See also: Psalm 37:3, 5, 11; 72:4; Isaiah 61:1; Numbers 12:3.

## QUESTIONS

What areas of your life hinder you from obeying or accepting God's will? Pray that God will help you accept his will with meekness.

### Old Testament Beatitudes

There are many beatitudes that occur in the Old Testament, some of which sound remarkably similar to Jesus' words.

- Psalm 41:1 says, "Blessed is he who has regard for the weak..." and we remember Jesus' beatitude about the merciful (Matthew 5:7).
- The book of Psalms opens with a blessing on righteous behavior: Jesus tells us that those who hunger and thirst for this righteousness shall be satisfied (Matthew 5:6).
- Psalm 32:1-2 presents a beatitude upon all whom the Lord has forgiven. The psalm goes on to speak of what it is like to confess utter dependence upon God. Jesus speaks of those who are poor in spirit as being blessed inheritors of the Kingdom of God.
- In Proverbs 8:34-35, personified wisdom says, "Blessed is the man who listens to me... for he who finds me finds life." Jesus ends the Sermon on the Mount by advising his hearers to take his words to heart. Then he reveals to them the consequences—it is a matter of life and death (Matthew 7:24-27).

# BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS FOR THEY WILL BE FILLED.

—Matthew 5:6

## MEANING

Just as poverty leads to hunger, the recognition of one's spiritual poverty leads to a hunger for righteousness. Jesus is talking to people who desire God's rule. It is a rule that brings justice for all. It is a reign in which God will satisfy the hungry and thirsty for righteousness. A fulfillment of God's promise in Isaiah 65:13, "My servants will eat...my servants will rejoice..."

What the WORLD Says	What JESUS Says
Hungering for things to be right is a fool's game. Nothing ever changes. It's fine to compromise and to set aside honor when doing what is right is inconvenient. It's all politics, so quit worrying about what is right, just go for what you need. You gotta look out for number one!	Jesus holds out the promise that those who are starved for righteousness will be satisfied. His kingdom is characterized by "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17).

## RELATED TEXTS

"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink..." (John 7:37).

See also: Isaiah 55:1-13; 65:13; John 6:48; Romans 14:17.

### Blessings and Curses

Luke's gospel also contains a series of "woes" which are the opposites of the blessings (Luke 6:24-26).

- The woes describe the natural consequences to ignoring God's will. They tell us what we can expect if we do not live the way God desires.
- Here the blessings and curses are parallel, much the same as in Deuteronomy 28:1-19. At Mount Sinai, Moses set the covenant between God and the Israelites, laying out the natural consequences (both the blessings and the curses) of the people's responses.
- The parallel structure of the two passages gives the sermon in Luke's account the same authoritative feel of Moses' utterance. Jesus lays out its principles before his disciples and asks them the question, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46).
- It is clear Jesus claims authority for this teaching, and the Gospel of Matthew records the shock his hearers felt when faced with such claims (Matthew 7:28-29).

## QUESTIONS

In what ways has God satisfied you when you have hungered and thirsted for righteousness?





## Righteousness

- **Righteousness in the Old Testament** was a relational concept.


It described a legal relationship. That is, it was a relationship in terms of law, courts, judges, and so on (see Psalm 9:4; Psalm 15; Isaiah 5:7). In other words, it meant ethical or fair behavior.

It described a covenant relationship. It is a description of God's relating and doing right toward his people; it was also the expected behavior of God's people toward God (see, Ezekiel 18:5–9, 25–32).

- **Righteousness in the New Testament** reflected the two-fold distinction in the Old Testament.

The Apostle Paul expanded the legal sense of the concept. He applied it to Christ's work. Because of Jesus' atoning death on the cross (he died in our place), God makes right (justifies) sinners (Romans 4:5). Paul did not mean that God makes people righteous—that we can now only do what is right. Rather, he meant that God has applied Christ's righteousness—his perfect obedience and guiltlessness—to us, so we become “legally” (in the sense of a court proceeding) acquitted of the penalty of sin, which is death.

In Matthew, Jesus was not using the “legal” sense of the concept. Rather, righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount goes back to the “covenant relationship” sense. That is, in the kingdom of heaven, relationships are restored: (1) relationship between God and humanity; (2) relationship between humanity and creation; and (3) relationships among humans. In the kingdom of heaven, people relate rightly, doing what is right in all relationships.





# BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL, FOR THEY WILL BE SHOWN MERCY.

—Matthew 5:7

## MEANING

Mercy is part of God's own nature. "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness..." (Exodus 34:6). Besides, God's expects mercy from his people: "He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). People who have experienced mercy and forgiveness are filled with gratitude. Their gratitude cultivates a merciful attitude in return.

What the WORLD Says	What JESUS Says
"We want justice!" "Take no prisoners" are the slogans of the proud, the strong and the careless. We like to condemn others to make ourselves feel better. Our world idolizes the arrogant and merciless in the sports world, the world of wealth and fame, and on the movie screen. "We are the champions—no time for losers." Mercy has become a liability—it is way too costly and will prevent the attainment of our goals.	Jesus again challenges the way the rest of the world thinks. Jesus lifts up mercy as an essential quality. In fact, mercy is what Jesus' life was all about—God's mercy to us. In many places Jesus makes the connection between giving mercy and receiving it (See Matthew 6:12–15, 18:21–35). It is not that we can buy God's mercy by our own acts of mercy, but that only those who know God's mercy can be truly merciful and receive God's most precious gift—eternal life.

## RELATED TEXTS

"But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God..." (Psalm 86:15).

"...Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love..." (Joel 2:13).

See also: Psalm 103:8, 145:8; Luke 6:36.

## QUESTIONS

Which people in your life do you find it most difficult to be merciful to? In what practical ways can you demonstrate God's mercy in your local community?

# BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART FOR THEY WILL SEE GOD.

—Matthew 5:8

## MEANING

Seeing God is one of the greatest hopes of the believer (1 John 3:2–3). But only the pure in heart may receive this blessing. Purity of heart, the heart that desires only what God wants, is not the result of personal effort. In other words, a pure heart is not the same as maturity of Christian experience. A pure heart is clean of sin. Only Christ can clean us from sin. God must give a pure heart (Psalm 51:10). Although purity of heart is not something we work toward, it is something we desire and God grants.

What the WORLD Says	What JESUS Says
While our culture values things like pure air, pure water, pure food, it seems to devalue the pure heart. Some people insist on a "smoke-free" environment but do not mind a polluted heart.	True happiness begins in the presence of God. It is a hope that sustains and inspires those living in the kingdom of heaven. One of Jesus' constant criticisms of the Jewish leaders was their hypocrisy. That is, their desire to appear pure and holy, while being corrupted and impure inside. Jesus came to fulfill the promise in Ezekiel 36:25–27: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean... I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you...."

## RELATED TEXTS

"Create in me a pure heart, O God..." (Psalm 51:10).

"...But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:2–3).

See also: Exodus 33:20; Psalm 24:3–4; Psalm 51; Hebrews 12:14; Revelation 22:1–4.

## QUESTIONS

What might happen if you pray to the Lord as David did in Psalm 51, verse 10: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me"?



# BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS FOR THEY WILL BE CALLED SONS OF GOD.

—Matthew 5:9

## MEANING

This Beatitude brings together two important Old Testament concepts: peace and sons of God. Peace is a central characteristic of the kingdom of heaven. “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child will lead them...” (Isaiah 11:6). Those who would normally be at war with each other will be in harmony. All things are made right and peace prevails. The Old Testament applies the title of “son of God” to the Messiah (Psalm 2:7). However, in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul explains that when we are in Christ, we “receive the full rights of sons;” in other words, we are made adopted children of God (Galatians 4:5).

What the WORLD Says	What JESUS Says
Peace at any price, Give peace a chance. Peace—the cessation of all conflict—has become what a world in war is desperately looking for. Some feel world peace would solve all problems; others are ready to buy peace at almost any cost. Many seek a personal peace through a variety of avenues—drugs, music, meditation, and others. Still, the cessation of conflict will not substitute for true peace, the kind of peace Jesus offers.	Jesus, before leaving this earth, promised his disciples his peace: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives...” (John 14:27). His peace is a clear sign that the kingdom is in our midst. Only Jesus makes this peace possible (Ephesians 2:14) and only in him we become adopted children (Galatians 4:5).

## RELATED TEXTS

“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18).

See also: Psalm 4:8; Isaiah 9:6; Romans 5:1.

See “Shalom” on pages 12 and 13.

## QUESTIONS

Can you think of a difficult or painful time in your life when you experienced Jesus’ peace in a special way? How is the peace that Jesus gives different from the kind of peace the world promises?

# BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED BECAUSE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

—Matthew 5:10

## MEANING

Just like the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit, it also belongs to the ones persecuted because of righteousness. This verse is a reminder of God’s prophets in the Old Testament. These were people who stood in for the right. They encountered opposition; they were mocked and harmed because they stood for what was right. But their reward is great. They truly enjoy the benefits of the kingdom of heaven.

What the WORLD Says	What JESUS Says
Principles are good, but not if they get you killed or cause you grief. Righteousness has little foundation in our world today. Standards for right and wrong are not defined by what God desires for our good. People get away with what they can.	Jesus made it clear to his disciples that persecution would occur: “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20). Often doing what is right leads people to feel lonely, isolated, and persecuted. However, Jesus promised that he would not leave these people alone. He sent the Holy Spirit to guide and comfort. Besides, he also promises that “Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy” (John 16:22).

## RELATED TEXTS

“And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast” (1 Peter 5:10).

“But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed... But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord...” (1 Peter 3:14–15).

See also: Luke 6:22–23; John 15:18–21.

## QUESTIONS

Think of a time when you felt like speaking up for what was right. If you did not speak up, what prevented you from doing so? If you did, what resulted from it? How can you help others who are facing persecution because of righteousness?



# BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HAVE NOT SEEN YET HAVE BELIEVED.

—John 20:29

## MEANING

Jesus is speaking about his resurrection. It is one thing to have seen the risen Christ as hundreds of his disciples did (1 Corinthians 15:6) and yet another to believe today based on the word of these eyewitnesses. There is a special blessing experienced by those who know that Christ has risen, based on the testimony alone.

What the WORLD Says	What JESUS Says
"Who really knows what happened back there 2000 years ago?" "People don't just get up from the dead. The whole thing was probably a hoax or a mistake." There is much skepticism about the events that eyewitness recorded in the Bible.	"I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). We have the testimony of the Apostles (1 Corinthians 15:3-8), and the ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 15:26).

## RELATED TEXTS

"Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy..." (1 Peter 1:8).

See also: John 1:12, 17:20-21; 1 Corinthians 15.

## QUESTIONS

When have you seen  
God give the gift of  
faith to yourself or  
other believers?

# IT IS MORE BLESSED TO GIVE THAN TO RECEIVE.

—Acts 20:35

## MEANING

Giving, especially to those who are in need, will lead to happiness quicker than if we are only on the receiving end. The life that constantly takes without giving is a selfish life, and selfishness only leads to greater unhappiness. Meeting other peoples' needs is the road to a blessed life.

What the WORLD Says	What JESUS Says
"Get what you can now—after all, the one who dies with the most toys wins." No one's going to take care of you. If you're generous, you'll be taken advantage of. You have to make it on your own. Besides, you can't please everyone, so you have to please yourself. Charity is a scam, so get what you can, and take what you can get.	Jesus tells us that he came to serve, not to be served (Matthew 20:28). He came to give himself and calls us to the same lifestyle. It is easy to miss that this giving was a joy to him because he delighted to do what God had called him to (John 17:13). "A servant is not greater than his master" and we are blessed when we follow the Master's example (John 13:15-17).

## RELATED TEXTS

"...And if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday" (Isaiah 58:10).  
See also: Matthew 6:1-4; Luke 6:38; 22:24-30.

## QUESTIONS

When have you experienced giving as a delight? When has it not been a joy? Ask God to help you release your grip on worldly riches, so that you can have a servant's heart like Jesus.

- *Shalom* is about relationships. When humans sinned in the Garden, three relationships were broken:
  1. Our relationship with God;
  2. Our relationship with Creation;
  3. Our relationship with each other.
- Jesus brings peace in all these relationships. Jesus restores this *shalom*.
- The kingdom of heaven is the context in which *shalom* prevails. Things work according to God's original design. Only in this context, true joy is possible.

## Shalom

Traditionally, this Hebrew word is translated as "peace." When we think about peace, we tend to define it as absence of conflict. However, *shalom* means much more than that.

- The best example of what *shalom* means is the Garden of Eden. In Eden, all things functioned according to the order and purpose that God assigned them. There was order and harmony, balance and wholeness.
- When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, this state of being was broken. Things are no longer the way they are supposed to be.