

The Sermon on the Mount: Exposition of Matthew 5-6

Heavenly Father, we know that Your Word could not be fathomed in ten lifetimes by the most dedicated, intelligent, and sincere people in the world. So we humbly approach Your Word, specifically these teachings on the essence of discipleship found in the Sermon on the Mount. As we stand before You and as we work together, we pray that we would gain a clearer picture, mentally and also deep in our hearts, of what it is that You ask of us, what it is that You want us to be and are making us to be. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

In this lecture we will be looking at the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with the passage known as the beatitudes, from Matthew 5:3 and following:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

There are various ways of trying to understand this list. It could be understood simply as a list of things that Christians are supposed to do or be, traits that we are supposed to acquire, a description of the blessed character.

The passage begins with three beatitudes of need, of deficit, of awareness of one's need for grace, for transformation. If you are poor in spirit you know you need God's grace. If you are aware of God's grace then you know you are a sinner and you will mourn over it. You will not be indifferent or complacent to your sinfulness. Next, if you are truly mourning over your sin, you are going to be meek, refusing to assert yourself. The person who is poor in spirit knows his sin, and the person who is mourning over his sin also knows he doesn't have the right to assert himself. He doesn't have the right to demand his due. These three things together show an awareness of need that leads to a desire, not just to know the problem, but to taste the solution. Thus the next beatitude speaks of a desire for the solution. That desire is a hunger and a thirst for righteousness.

The word *beatitudes* is translated, “blessed are.” The word means “happy.” When Matthew writes “blessed are...,” that means “happy are...” It also can mean, “carefree,” or, “free from burdens.” The idea, however, is not that we're simply happy in the sense that we're happy after we've had a full meal, or after we've laughed hard at a joke. It refers to a deeper happiness, a happiness that comes from peace with God. This is subtler than our common use of the word, “happy.” It indicates a sense of well-being. Keeping this in mind allows us to make sense of the beatitudes, because they don't describe happiness in the sense of laughing or chuckling. Rather they come from an awareness of your well-being before God. That's why we use the word, “blessed.”

Jesus' declaration, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” challenges us. Our society admires confidence. It admires the self-made man or the self-made woman, the person who is self-reliant. When your little child is trying to tie his shoelaces he has the idea, he knows what he wants to do, but he doesn't have the manual dexterity to do it. He gets close to making his knot and barely misses by pulling too early or

pulling too late and you think he's just going to explode into tears or a rage. So you offer to help but he says, "No Daddy, I can do it myself." The child is becoming self-reliant.

But Jesus says in this beatitude the starting point in the kingdom is to know that you cannot rely on yourself, to know that your spirit is poor. You cannot be good enough, strong enough, righteous enough to make it on your own before God or in His kingdom. If you take that truth seriously, you will mourn over it, and there is a blessedness in mourning. It is better to mourn over sin than it is to be indifferent to sin. It is better to grieve over your own sin and the sin of your society and world, than it is to be careless about them. The Scriptures teach that this mourning over sin is vital. "Streams of tears flow from my eyes for your law is not obeyed" (Psalm 119:136). "Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourself before the Lord and He will lift you up" (James 4). If you recognize your spiritual poverty, you will mourn over it, and that will lead you to be meek. Specifically, you will not go around asserting yourself.

These beatitudes are not dealing with personality traits, but with character traits. Jesus is not saying, "Blessed are those who are shy and retiring and don't assert themselves or who don't assert anything." Rather, He is saying, "Blessed are those who, when they assert, do not assert for their own selfish benefit, but rather assert for the cause of Christ, for the cause of the kingdom, for the sake of the poor or for the sake of justice." You can be a very forceful person and use your force effectively and still be meek, as long as you are using that force for kingdom purposes, for the good of others. It's not an issue of personality; it is an issue of character. Likewise, you can be shy and say very little and yet not be meek at all because you use your silence to let people know that you're unhappy with them and to manipulate them in various ways. You can be quiet, but yet very aggressive. It's an issue of character, not personality.

The first three beatitudes together lead to the fourth, the pivotal beatitude. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." A disciple is not content, is not satisfied with the unrighteousness and sin in his own life and in the world. The first three beatitudes all lead up to the idea of being hungry and thirsty for righteousness.

There are a couple of problems that keep contemporary readers from understanding the full impact of this beatitude. The first is that we live in a society that has a problem with eating too much, not with eating too little. Thus, "hunger and thirst" are dead metaphors. When Jesus spoke of "hunger and thirst," He was talking about something that His hearers really understood. There were a lot of people in Israel who went without food and if there was a short harvest, the emperor got it first and then the priests shared with the people. So these people knew what hunger was. In our society, today, we don't understand, because we go months, even years, without really being hungry. Jesus was talking about a very real thing to His hearers, one that is not real to many Western readers.

The second problem is that we tend to read the book of Matthew through the eyes of Paul. As a result, we think, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," means that, if you call upon God, He will give you the righteousness of Christ and you'll be forgiven. But Jesus has in mind that you will actually *do something* to take care of your hunger, and that's what we see in the next three beatitudes. If you are poor in spirit, you filter that through "hunger and thirst for righteousness," and you will become a merciful person. If you are self-righteous and think you can handle everything that comes your way, if you think that life is under your control and you can do pretty much whatever you wish, then it is very easy to entirely lack mercy toward others. Such a person would look at somebody who was in need—somebody in distress, somebody whose marriage is a wreck, somebody who lost their job—and say,

“Why don’t you just discipline yourself? Why don’t you just try harder? Why don’t you just buck up the way I do?” But if you know your spiritual neediness, when you look at the other person, you will say, “I know exactly what you’re going through. I’ve been there. I am there. I’m no better than you.” In this way you find yourself capable of mercy. Instead of judging, you ask, “How can I help?”

The first beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit...,” thus seems to correspond to the fifth, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy,” and, certainly, the second beatitude, “Blessed are those who mourn...,” leads to the sixth, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.” If you mourn, you’ll be pure in heart. That is, if you really grieve over your sin, if you’re truly sorrowful over it, you will want to do something about it. You will strive for holiness. You will, eventually be more pure in heart.

Likewise, if you are meek and you hunger and thirst for righteousness, you will be a peacemaker (the seventh beatitude). Most conflicts come from people who assert their own way. Most of the time when people fight, each one is saying, “I want it my way.” Each accuses the other, “No, it is my way, my prerogative, my privilege that you’re stepping on.” If you’re meek, you will know you don’t have much to assert, so you will be a peacemaker.

Furthermore, if you are an honest person, people will be able to come to you and say, “I know you will tell the truth and help us resolve this conflict without looking to benefit yourself.” You will not side with the more powerful person or with your friend, but will tell the truth and so people will turn to you to help them make peace. If you will be meek rather than seek to exalt yourself you will be a peacemaker.

When you do all of the things mentioned in the first seven beatitudes, then a variety of things will happen. One is that you will be persecuted. That too, of course, is in some ways a blessing. “Blessed are you when people persecute you” because it means you’re having an impact on the world. People can’t deny that there is something happening in you. They won’t be able to ignore you, and if they don’t accept what you’re saying, they will object to it or they will reject it.

Hopefully, much more often you will influence the world. You will be “salt” (Matthew 5:13) and your influence will be appreciated. The purpose of salt is to retard decay, to keep the world from being as evil as it could be. I’m an ordained minister as well as a professor and I also play basketball. Sometimes when I play basketball, I play with non-Christians and I don’t tell them that I’m a Bible professor or an ordained minister. Eventually we start talking and sooner or later someone asks where I work. “Well, I work over at the seminary.” They find out what I do and who I am. Then their behavior changes. They still curse the same as always, but then they look at me and say, “Oh, we’re sorry, Dan.” Some of them may curse less and others at least show they are aware that there’s a standard. That is a small illustration of how the presence of Christians can retard corruption in the world.

No only do we help the world negatively, by slowing down decay, but positively by witnessing to God and causing others to think of Him. Ideally, if people are really looking carefully, they will see our good deeds and recognize that this is not something that comes simply from the resolve of a man or a woman. They will see that there’s something sublime, something divine. They might not always become Christians as a result, but they’ll say, “Maybe there is a God.” They may even say, “Praise God in heaven, who has so changed people that we see these good deeds from them.”

There is another way to look at the beatitudes as a whole. We can see that the first four are all Godward, directed toward God. We know our spiritual poverty; we mourn before God because of our sin, our inability to keep His law; and we are meek before Him. Then we take our hunger for righteousness and our thirst for righteousness to Him and He satisfies them.

He satisfies us in three ways. First, He satisfies our hunger by making us new. This is the main emphasis of the Beatitudes. They are a description of who we are actually supposed to be by His grace. Second, Jesus Himself satisfies His own righteous demands, since we will never make it if we try to be perfectly righteous. Later in Matthew we read Jesus' statement that He will give His life as a ransom for many, for their sins, to give them life. Third, Jesus also means that He will completely satisfy us in eternity, when all our wickedness will be done away with and our righteousness will make us shine like the sun. We will all be made sinless, even as God is sinless.

So the first four beatitudes are directed toward God and the next four are directed toward humanity. The poor in spirit are the merciful. Those who mourn will be pure in heart. Those who are meek will make peace. And those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and are filled by it will cause all sorts of reactions in the world including persecution—the eighth beatitude—as those who live in darkness resist the light.

Some Christians, of course, do not show a hunger and thirst for righteousness like they should. It is easy to imitate the world. In the world people often do not hunger at all. They just drift along, fit in, hang on, and hold out, hoping for the best without striving for anything. They are not hungry for anything; they just want to make it through another week. When they're about thirty-five years old they start looking forward to retirement, and then when they retire, they're bored.

Other people in the world are hungry, but for the wrong things. They're hungry for power, prestige, position and possessions. There are lots of people who hunger for such things. One reason for their misplaced hunger is that they're surrounded by a culture that encourages it. Another reason is that they are unregenerate, they simply don't have eyes to see.

In this social environment, Christians can also be hungry for the wrong things because they are unduly influenced by the world. They are redeemed but they live just about like anybody else in their city or town. What they need is to read the Word, use all the ordinary means of grace, and fellowship with good solid Christian friends. Such things make Christians hunger and thirst as they should for what they should.

Finally, notice that two of the blessings in the beatitudes, the first and last, are in the present tense ("theirs is the kingdom") while the rest are in the future tense. This, again, shows that the kingdom is both here and not here yet. Two beatitudes say we already have it and six that say we are going to get more.

Matthew 5:17-48

The New Testament scholar Stephen Westerholm said, "There was something about Jesus which would be construed as a setting aside of the law." This is true. People seemed to charge Him with not being properly concerned with the law. They especially thought He lacked reverence for the fourth commandment, about honoring the Sabbath. The religious leaders might have also thought He violated the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and mother," saying that this extended to honoring one's elders and leaders.

Jesus anticipated that charge and responded to it in 5:17 and following. "Don't think that I've come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." In fact all the law will be fulfilled. "Not one letter, not one stroke of a pen will pass away until it all is accomplished." The

words Jesus is using there—not one letter, not one stroke of a pen—have to do with the Aramaic alphabet. There are two Aramaic letters that are very small. One is precisely the size of a comma, and the other is just a dot. One of these letters often functions like their silent “e” in English. He is saying that He is not even going to loose the silent “e” from the law. In Aramaic and in Hebrew the “d” and the “r” are very similar except for one small stroke of the pen. Jesus is saying we’re not going to make one little mistake, just one confusion between a “d” and an “r.” This sort of minute change could perhaps be significant enough to change a whole word.

In His opening statement, Jesus is promising no changes in the law, whatsoever. He said He had come to fulfill the whole thing. Furthermore, He claimed that He had come to command His disciples (Matt. 5:20, 21) to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, if they wanted to enter the kingdom of heaven.

However, Jesus redefines holiness and righteousness, and redefines what the law truly expects. The rabbis had a saying, “Take the law, turn it over and over and all is in it.” Now what they meant was, turn it over and over and you can come up with more and more regulations that tell you exactly what God requires. This means more rules. The scribes prescribed rule after rule. When Jesus defines His concept of righteousness, He moves in a very different direction.

The first direction Jesus takes is that of surpassing the scribes and Pharisees by doing the right thing for the right reasons. Many people in this world do the right thing for the wrong reason. There are people who handle large sums of money faithfully because they know the auditors are coming. There are people who don’t tell lies because they know there is someone else around who knows what the truth is. It is not enough to do the right thing. You must do the right thing for the right reason. The goal is to have a perfect harmony between your behavior and your thought life, so you don’t do the right thing out of fear of getting caught, but out of a desire to please God. The objective is to not even have an obligation or a selfish calculation involved in our motivations to do the right thing.

Consider what Jesus says about murder (Matt. 5:21-26):

“You’ve heard that it was said to those long ago, you shall not murder and whoever murders shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you, that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you are liable (or will be liable) to judgment and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, but if you say, “You fool!” you will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift on the altar, and you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother. Then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard and you’ll be thrown into prison. I tell you, you’ll never get out until you have paid the last penny.”

When teaching this passage new Christians, or to children, you should first list all the things that they may not understand. You may understand these things already, but if you’re really a good teacher, you have to ask yourself what your students know. There are a lot of words in this passage that a beginner may not understand, such as “judgment,” “council” (or “Sanhedrin” depending on the translation you have), or “fool,” and would want to know why you would be liable for “the hell of fire” for saying it. He would wonder what is “the hell of fire” and what was going on in offering a gift on the altar. As a teacher you need to find out what those words mean.

The real riddle of this passage is to understand the progression of thought, how one thing leads to the next. It starts off pretty simply: Jesus says that the ancients have heard, “You shall not murder and if you do murder, you’ll be liable to judgment.” So far this is perfectly understandable. Murdering is prohibited. Then verse 22 has a kind of a riddle in it and the riddle is the word that begins the verse—the word, “but.” Different translations interpret it different ways. The word appears three times. It’s a Greek word that can mean “but,” or it can mean “moreover,” or “furthermore.” It’s not quite as strong a word as “but.” It is not saying that what comes next completely contrasts with what is listed before. But neither can it simply be equated with “and.” It communicates “here’s another thing” that is certainly not identical.

So verse 22 says, “But, or furthermore, I say to you if you’re angry with a brother, you’ll be liable to judgment,” then, “furthermore, if you insult your brother...” The NIV speaks of “anyone who says to his brother *raca*...” The word *raca* here means something like “airhead” or “empty head” or something like our horrible phrases, “good-for-nothing,” “idiot,” “moron.” So if you are angry, and furthermore, if you think somebody is worthless, and furthermore, if you call them a fool, these things are all liable to the judgment of hell.

What Jesus is saying is pretty simple. It’s good to refrain from murder, but there are also pre-murderous dispositions that are just as liable to judgment as murder is. This does not mean there is no difference between murder and hating somebody, but they are both sins before God. So, in particular, the first thing He is saying is that if you are angry with your brother, if you judge somebody as worthless, or if you judge some to be a fool, you are violating the sixth commandment.

The term “fool” would mean a moral reprobate, an evil person. If you judge somebody to be a fool or a good-for-nothing, then it is a fairly short step to murdering him or her. If you had the power and could get away with it you might do it. After all, why do people abort babies? It’s not because they hate babies in the abstract. It is because they make a judgment that they will be happier if this baby doesn’t come into the world. That is to say, they judge a particular baby to be worthless, almost literally—worth less alive than it is dead. Euthanasia involves the same thing. Someone decides that a person does not possess a certain quality of life, and that, therefore, we will remove that life. If you judge somebody to be good for nothing, empty, of no value then it is possible to kill him. You can also destroy people with your words and anger is the precursor to that. Of course, calling somebody a fool is to call them morally worthless and therefore ripe for the judgment of God.

From verse 21 to 22 we learn that you don’t just refrain from murder, but you refrain from the things that lead to murder. Then in verse 23, He moves to a different level. He introduces a new situation: “When you’re offering your gift at the altar and there remember that someone has something against you...” Thus, the first thing Jesus says is to not murder; the second thing is to not have the attitude that can lead to murder. Now He’s saying, “Not only are you responsible to avoid murder yourself, but you are also responsible for other people.” Jesus is no longer telling us not to be mad at someone else. He is saying that if you have somebody mad at you, you need to do something. He doesn’t even say that they are angry for a just cause. It simply says that if you remember that they are angry, then you are responsible. You are not responsible to wait for them to come to you. You are responsible to go to them.

Furthermore, He is not only saying you are responsible for your brother, when your brother is angry at you (Matt. 5:23, 24). He is also saying that you are even responsible to make peace with your adversaries—with the person who is taking you to court and who wants to punish you (Matt. 5:25, 26). Even there you are responsible to remove hatred that will lead to murder. There is a progress in this instruction; Jesus is going deeper and deeper. Not only “Don’t murder,” but “Don’t have in yourself

attitudes that lead to murder.” Also “Remove from your brother attitudes that might make him murderous toward you,” and even, “Do what you can to remove attitudes in your enemies that would give them murderous dispositions toward you.” This is what is involved in fulfilling the law. It is not merely refraining from the external problem, but actively removing it as far as you possibly can. Of course, we understand that we can’t always make peace with everybody. We may try to be reconciled and somebody may not want to be reconciled. That’s a different story. Jesus is saying, “You do your best to remove it entirely.”

It’s not hard to see why Jesus is saying these things. These are universal conditions for discipleship worldwide. This is what it means to be a disciple. Jesus is fleshing out what it means to have love and to abide by the law of love.