

# INTRODUCTION TO *THE BEATITUDES*

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Welcome to this six-session course on the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are a short but profoundly beautiful and influential collection of sayings by Jesus. They sum up his teaching about what it means to live as a child of God's kingdom. They can be found right at the beginning of a long teaching discourse by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, known as the Sermon on the Mount. One of the ways that Matthew presents Jesus is as a kind of "new Moses." So, just as Moses taught the people of Israel from the mountain after he had received the law, so Jesus begins his ministry by going up a mountain and teaching his disciples.

Alongside other key texts that we are exploring in this course, such as the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the Creeds, Christians of previous generations would probably have known the Beatitudes by heart. They were a key text for learning the Christian faith. But in today's church the Beatitudes seem to have fallen out of use. Many people still know the Lord's Prayer by heart and, with a bit of help, most church people can still recite the creed and puzzle out most of the Commandments. But who knows the Beatitudes? When do they get a mention? And what do they mean?

This course believes that following Jesus requires us to engage with this important text, so that it is restored to a central place in the life of the church. We believe that the Beatitudes, and trying to live them out, is one of the best ways of loving God with all your heart and understanding the Christian vision for the world. Like our forebears, we also think it would be good to learn this text by heart.

Here are the Beatitudes as we find them in Matthew's Gospel:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“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.”

#### MATTHEW 5:1-10

In the first four sessions of this course we will look at the eight beatitudes themselves, taking them two at a time. The last two sessions are concerned with Jesus’ teaching about living as citizens of the kingdom of God, and then—jumping to the end of the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus’ famous story about houses built on rock or sand—consider how we can build our lives on the teaching and example of Jesus, as we see it in the Beatitudes.

In his book on the Beatitudes, *Living Well*, Robert Warren identifies a crafted three-fold pattern to each of the eight sayings. Each beatitude begins with **an announcement of God’s blessing**. This is one of the main points of Christ’s teaching: God wishes to bless us. God pours love and affirmation upon us. And we are particularly blessed when we live Christ-like lives. Having announced the blessing, Jesus then describes a characteristic that could be referred to as **a vocation**, something that listeners are being asked to emulate or nurture in themselves, such as poverty of spirit or meekness of heart. Then there is **a promise**: this is what the person who lives by this vocation will receive. For the first and last beatitude it is nothing less than the kingdom of God itself. Those who are poor in Spirit and those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake are told that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” For the other beatitudes some *aspect* of the kingdom is

given: to those who mourn, the strength to persevere; to those who are pure in heart, the sight of God; to those who are merciful, mercy for themselves.

In our explorations we will see how this pattern of blessing, vocation, and promise is lived out, particularly in Jesus' own life and ministry. And because some of these sayings are difficult to understand, and quite uncomfortable for today's way of looking at life, seeing how Jesus lives them out himself is the best way of understanding what they mean. So, for instance, if you are not sure what Jesus means by "blessed are those who mourn," look at the examples in Jesus' own life and ministry where he cries out with sadness and anguish to God. This will help us see that mourning is not just about bereavement, but a whole attitude of lamentation and crying out to God when we see and experience the injustices and sorrows of the world.

Even though we will deal with them separately, the Beatitudes are a totality. We should not pick between them, saying we are the sort of person who is more comfortable with one rather than another. This may be the case; our different personalities and experiences do predispose us one way or another. Some of us may find that we are naturally people who thirst for justice or who are merciful to others. But likewise we may also conclude that being pure in heart or meek do not come naturally to us.

Whatever our natural predisposition, all of the Beatitudes are for all of us, and they need to be understood as a whole, and taken as an entirety. They begin with poverty of Spirit, because this beatitude is about acknowledging our need of God and the essential poverty and short-sighted limitations of our own desires. From this the other beatitudes flow. And to some sort of persecution and misunderstanding is where all the beatitudes lead.

They are complex. They are hard to live out. But they are also very beautiful. They describe what it means to live as a child of the kingdom of God, and they are only perfectly lived out by Jesus himself. They

describe what it means to live by a set of standards, vocations, and attitudes that go way beyond the observation of rules or the keeping of the law. This is what life looks like when you are truly Christ-like.

In a few short sentences the Beatitudes are probably the most important, subversive, and revolutionary text in the Bible. In order to follow Jesus and live the Christian life we need to enter into the challenging world of the Beatitudes. That is what this exciting little course is all about.