

Preaching the Beatitudes

By Bob Young

The Beatitudes must be read against the background of Jesus' time, and not through Christian lenses. The Beatitudes are not Jesus' effort to summarize Christianity. If anything, they are Jesus' effort to correct the misunderstandings and mistaken emphases of Judaism. As such they must be understood against the background of Jewish attitudes and practices in the first century. They belong to the genre of wisdom literature and function as wisdom literature typically functions. As wisdom literature, the Beatitudes call for a fresh look at self. They urge us to examine ourselves on the inside, rather than looking only at the exterior. Those who look only at the outside may seem righteous, but it is what is on the inside that really counts. Jesus mentions this later in Matthew (23:23-28) in his "woeful" admonition of the Pharisees.

There are eight beatitudes which follow the pattern, "blessed are....for...." (verses 3-10), followed by a general beatitude which does not follow the same pattern (v. 11). The first and the eighth in the series are characterized by the same resulting statement ("theirs is the kingdom of heaven"), yielding a possible 1-6-1 pattern. Several efforts have been made to show additional organizational patterns within the six parenthetical beatitudes.¹

Following is a list of the Beatitudes, "blessed are...."

The poor in spirit

Those that mourn

The humble or meek

Those who hunger and thirst in seeking righteousness

Those who are compassionate or merciful

The pure in heart

The peacemakers

Those who are persecuted for the sake of Jesus

This essay suggests that a helpful grid for reading the Beatitudes is to identify the new way in which one is to look at the world—beginning with one's view of self in light of one's view of God. How one views the world begins within. The Beatitudes (and much of Matthew 5) may be characterized as contrastive wisdom literature. The Pharisees and Jewish community expected one answer—Jesus gave the opposite answer. This is often observed in the last half of chapter 5, it is less frequently used as a grid for understanding the Beatitudes.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

The first blessing is pronounced on those who are poor in spirit, those aware of spiritual need, the spiritually impoverished. This is more than a blessing pronounced on those who are aware of their situation; this beatitude suggests that it is acceptable, even desirable, to be

¹ One example of such organizing patterns is the observation that the first three (or four) are internal or attitudinal and the second three (or four) external and active. This organization may have an element of truth, but also seems somewhat artificial when the text is carefully analyzed.

spiritually impoverished. This is not motivation away from spiritual growth and maturity, but it is a direct rebuff to the Pharisees and the typical Jewish attitudes of that day. The Jews expected a conquering Messiah who would come with riches and power. Jesus speaks of the kingdom of heaven in terms of poverty and powerlessness. This is a slap against ego and pride, arrogance and judgmentalism. Blessed are the spiritually destitute. Blessed are those that recognize that within themselves they contribute nothing of value.

When we see ourselves correctly, we become more kingdom-fit.

Blessed are those that mourn, for they shall be comforted

Blessed are those who when they see themselves find it a source of sadness. Blessed are those who seeing themselves as they really are find the result a cause of regret. I am not happy with who I am. It has been said that the Pharisees mourned about nothing except the occupation by Rome. Some have seen this passage as referring to mourning about sins, and that application may have validity given the Pharisaical attitude that saw others as sinners (Luke 18:9-14). Again, one must be careful not to impose a Christian (new covenant) understanding on this early teaching of Jesus as he confronts the Jewish religious system of his day.

Only when we see ourselves correctly can we find comfort in the message of Jesus.

Blessed are the humble or meek, for they will inherit the earth

Blessed are those who seeing themselves conclude that there is no reason to exalt self. There is no reason to exalt self above others; there is certainly no reason to be proud before God. Think again of the pride the Pharisee exhibited in comparing himself to the publican in Luke 18. It may be helpful to explore the distinctions between humility and meekness (strength made gentle), but the concept seems the opposite of pride and power. The earth is not to be inherited according to typical worldly criteria and expectations.

The earth is to be received by the meek rather than the forceful. It is not available for the taking by those who exercise authority and power.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled

This blessing is pronounced on those who desire righteousness. The blessing is not for every seeker—it is for the diligent seeker, those who hunger and thirst in their desire for righteousness. This is an intriguing beatitude because one wonders if the Jews might have heard in this statement a challenge to become more righteous based on their own actions. Jesus says it is good to desire and pursue righteousness. Is not that precisely what the Jewish leaders were doing? The problem was that they were doing it in the wrong way!²

The blessing on those who desire righteousness reflects that there are some who see their own neediness, incompleteness, and inability to be righteous. Those who can see need when they see themselves will seek to change or to be changed. To desire righteousness demands that one first see the great need of one's life.

² This observation illustrates that the beatitudes must be read as a unit, and that there may be specific hermeneutical problems that arise if one becomes too involved in linguistic questions. Jesus is painting a verbal portrait of a kingdom person. He is describing a person whose righteousness is "inside out". That is, the righteousness of the kingdom comes from internal change and not from external conformity.

Blessed are the compassionate or merciful, for they shall be shown mercy

It is easier to be compassionate to others when we have clearly seen our own need for mercy. Again, this beatitude is about how we see ourselves. Do we see ourselves as in need of compassion? Do we see our need for mercy? If we consider ourselves self-sufficient spiritually, we tend to set up high expectations for others, and fail to exhibit compassion, understanding, and mercy.

Seeing ourselves correctly, as those in need of mercy, is essential to showing mercy to others.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God

How we see others first passes through the prism of how we see ourselves. This is reflected in Jesus' admonition to "love others as we love ourselves." When we look at ourselves, all kinds of selfish motivations can get in the way. We seldom do things without some perceived benefit. Further, when we are motivated by more than one result, we tend to focus on the benefit for others and downplay the benefit we receive. To be honest with self and to be honest with others is a part of what Jesus means by purity of heart.

In this beatitude, we are challenged to consider how we see ourselves and how we see others as the key to seeing God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God

When one expends an intense effort to obtain peace, one is more forgiving to others. When one knows the price God has paid so that we might be at peace, one is grateful, and that gratitude makes us like God. Gratitude is the mother of generosity and the opposite of pride. The connection between peacemaking and gratitude may not be apparent at first, but seeing my own need helps me appreciate the dilemma of others and helps me imitate God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

Persecution based on my desire for righteousness leads me to total dependence on God. I have no choice but to depend on God. The first and the last beatitudes communicate an extreme level of dependence on God. They also share the same result—such are those who are kingdom of heaven people.

Conclusion

The Beatitudes can be preached in several ways—as a longer series in which each blessing is treated separately, as a short two- or three-sermon series focused on a correct worldview, or as a single sermon. The longer series will challenge the preacher to find the beatitudinal threads that run through the Sermon on the Mount. Such will be necessary to avoid a sermon series that runs too long with too little material.

Regardless of the approach used, it is essential that the Beatitudes be understood in the first-century Jewish context and that they not been Christianized, or at least, that one not move to the Christian applications and principles too quickly.