

Matthew 5: 3-7 ‘How to live’ turned upside down

Wilkins, in his commentary on the Sermon of the Mount, summarises what the Beatitudes are all about in these words: *The Beatitudes open the Sermon on the Mount with a sober yet dazzling vision of the operation of the Kingdom of heaven among God’s people. More than simply a formal literary introduction, the Beatitudes summarise the essence of the sermon’s message, giving in a nutshell the way in which the kingdom makes its impact on the lives of those who respond to it.*

The character of this Kingdom life contravenes the values that most people hold dear, because God’s blessing rests on the unlikely ones - the poor in spirit, mourners, the meek, the persecuted. Thus the Beatitudes line an upside down reality, or more precisely they define reality in such a way that the usual order of things is seen to be upside down in the eyes of God.

From the outset, we need to realise that each of the Beatitudes spoken by Jesus reveals who Jesus considers to be blessed. We also need to recognise that these statements turned the expectations of Jesus’ day upside down as they are the reverse of what people expected. Furthermore, we need to recognise that even if some people did not feel happy or felt as if life was against them and they considered themselves worthless, from God’s perspective they were still blessed and nothing could change this or take this away from them. As we journey through five of these Beatitudes today, do look out for this! (I thought I could cover 7 today, but that was wishful thinking!)

Starting with v3: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This first Beatitude focuses on those who are poor materialistically, spiritually or emotionally speaking. Such people feel oppressed and recognise they do not have the resources in life to sort themselves out. This would have reflected the state of many of Jesus’ hearers.

The fact that Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is theirs, would have challenged the prevailing thought of the day where material blessings were considered to be a sign of God’s approval, accompanied by a matching spiritual blessing. In other words, those who were well off in this earthly life were viewed as being well off spiritually speaking too, whilst those who were poor - well there was little hope!

But in this statement, Jesus is turning this understanding on its head because the truth is that material blessings can often lead people to being self-sufficient and reliant on their own strength, rather than on God - in other words wealth and worldliness on one hand can lead to **independence from God**, whilst poverty and godliness on the other, leads to **dependence on God**.

Today, all of us without exception are materially speaking rich and wealthy to varying degrees compared to the real physical poverty that exists in the world. The recent 'Shack' Challenge that the Youth engaged in reminded us of the poverty that many people live in. What we need to be aware of, is the danger that material wealth if left unchecked, can result in our spiritual and emotional bankruptcy. As such we need to check our attitude. Is it one of self reliance that in reality leads to spiritual and emotional bankruptcy, or is it one of humility, one that acknowledges that we are poor in spirit, that makes us open to receiving from Jesus and depending on him? He always has more to give us! We never 'arrive'!

You see, right from the offset of the Beatitudes, we see Jesus contradicting all human judgements and expectations of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is given to the poor, not the rich; the feeble not the mighty; to little children human enough to accept it and not to those who boast they can obtain it by their own strength. This is God's upside down Kingdom - this is counter cultural living.

Next Beatitude is v4: Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

This Beatitude is not primarily concerned with the loss of a loved one, though most of us will know the impact of losing a loved one, rather this Beatitude is concerned with mourning the state of the world, humanity's sin and the presence of evil.

As John Stott says (p41) *We need, then, to observe that the Christian life, according to Jesus, is not all joy and laughter. Some Christians seem to imagine that, especially if they are filled with the Spirit, they must wear a perpetual grin on their face and be continuously boisterous and bubbly. How unbiblical can one become? No!*

As Jesus wept over those who would not receive him, so too, we are called to mourn over these things. But at the heart of our mourning we have hope - a sure and steadfast hope that in Jesus, he will, one day, deal with all injustice, sin, death and evil once and for all - Amen? Amen! As such this assurance can bring us comfort - God's amazing comfort!

The third Beatitude is v5 Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.

This Beatitude moves on from the personal qualities of being ‘poor in spirit and those who mourn’ found in the previous two Beatitudes which lay the foundation of what our lives should look like, to interpersonal attributes concerned with how we interact with each other.

All of us will have encountered or heard of people who like to dominate and build their own kingdoms through aggressive, harsh and tyrannical behaviour. This Beatitude, however, reminds us that it is possible to advance God’s cause without seeking to assert ourselves over others.

You see, being meek isn’t about being a doormat and allowing people to walk all over you - meekness is about being prepared to stand and confront bullying behaviour whilst proclaiming God’s Kingdom, but in a peaceful yet strong manner, the reward of which is the earth. Ironically it is the meek who will have dominion over that which the bullies have sought to dominate - this illustrates God’s upside down Kingdom values.

The next Beatitude is v6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Have you ever chosen to starve yourself or go without a meal in order to look forward to enjoying a special meal? This often gives a greater appreciation for that meal. In a similar way, people who choose to hunger and thirst for righteousness are people who are intentional about not only their own state but also the state of others.

Wilkins unpacks this Beatitude by saying (p207), *Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness desire to see justice executed on earth (that is for the downtrodden and those who have experienced injustice); they long to experience a deeper ethical righteousness in their own lives (that is living their lives following God’s commandments); and most of all they crave God’s promised salvation for everyone.*

This longing is what drives them because they are passionate about these things - this is what fills their heart, mind, soul and strength - this is how much they truly love Jesus. So, how much do you truly love Jesus? Are you passionate about these things too? Do you feel these things in every part of your being?

Because unless you feel passionate about righting wrongs; unless you want to live your whole life following God; unless you want the ends of the earth to learn of God's salvation, then you are short-changing yourself on so much Jesus has to offer and not realising your God given potential. What will your response be today?

The final Beatitude we're looking at today is found in v7 that reads Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Wilkins sums this Beatitude up like this (p208) *Mercy is a central biblical theme, because in God's great mercy he does not give humans what they deserve, rather, he gives them what they do not deserve. Likewise, the merciful are those who demonstrate forgiveness towards the guilty and kindness for the hurting and needy.*

Our heart attitude is what lies at the heart of the Beatitude. Do we pass judgement on people or do we love them, extending the same mercy God chooses to extend to us, without reservation?

All of us are undeserving - all of us do not merit mercy being extended to us, but God chooses to. How much more therefore should we extend mercy? As the prophet Micah says in Micah 6:8 *He has shown you, O mortal, 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.* So, do you need to be more merciful to those you encounter?

So, there we have an overview of the first 5 Beatitudes. What stood out to you? Now, what you may not realise is that these are not a pick 'n mix range that you can choose from - rather they are all qualities that we are all called to grow in and show in our lives without exception. We are at the same time called to be meek and merciful, poor in spirit, mournful, hungry and to show mercy.

Are we poor in spirit? Do we live lives that are independent or dependent on God?

Do we mourn as people over the state of the world, through which we experience God's amazing comfort knowing that he will have the last word?

Do we know how to be upstanding 'meek' people?

Do we know how to hunger after God?

Do we know how to extend mercy?