

Way to Be (The Beatitudes)  
Matthew 5:1-12, January 20, 2019

Today as a church, we are beginning a series on the Sermon on the Mount. This message by Jesus, recorded in Matthew 5-7, is summarized well by a guy named John Stott: “The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed.<sup>1</sup> It is the nearest thing to a manifesto that he ever uttered, for it is his own description of what he wanted his followers to be and to do.”<sup>2</sup> This summary gives us several good reasons as to why this series is so relevant for us today; why it’s so important for us to understand and apply to our lives. So, let’s begin to consider some of the values and the virtues that Jesus’ laid out in this time-tested and long-lasting sermon.<sup>3</sup> Please open your Bible to Matthew 4. Matthew 4:17 summarizes Jesus message this way, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” The “Kingdom of Heaven” is a phrase that Matthew uses more than 30 times in his Gospel. It can be defined as: “...the reign of God that [comes] through Jesus Christ – i.e. the establishment of God’s rule in the hearts and lives of his people, the overcoming of all the forces of evil.”<sup>4</sup> Matthew’s Gospel teaches us that Jesus’ kingly reign has already begun. It began during His earthly ministry and it was confirmed by His death/resurrection. But it won’t actually be fully realized until He returns again.<sup>5</sup> The reason that Jesus says that “the Kingdom of Heaven has come near” is that He, Jesus, the King, is now near. He has come to earth to preach and to explain His Kingdom. Entrance into that Kingdom begins with repentance, by turning away from our own sinful ways and turning to God’s ways. Agreeing that we want to be His people and to live our lives the way He has designed them to be lived.

At this point in Jesus ministry, large crowds from all over were following Him. Mt. 4:23 tells us, “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.”<sup>6</sup> It’s right in the midst of all this activity, when Jesus decides that it’s time to lay out the distinctives of his kingdom. Matthew 5:1-2 tells us, “Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. He said:”<sup>7</sup> Before we look at what Jesus said, it’s important that we know WHO Jesus was saying it to. They were not all devoted disciples. Some were probably just curious onlookers, others were genuine seekers after God’s truth, others were somewhere in-between.<sup>8</sup> One thing that becomes clear by the end of this sermon is that: “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching.” (Matthew 7:28) The crowds stayed for the entire message. They wanted to hear the Good News of his kingdom. Therefore, Jesus is addressing a massive crowd of people, likely growing in size the longer he stayed and preached.<sup>9</sup> This is probably why Jesus found a good place to sit down and teach: He wanted an opportunity to explain to them the distinguishing marks of the Kingdom of Heaven.

And so, He begins His sermon with a list of 8 Beatitudes, or 8 blessings. Now, “Blessed” does mean “happy” but it goes far beyond a temporary happiness that is based on current circumstances. Blessed refers to our ultimate wellbeing, to our genuine spiritual joy and contentment, as those who participate in the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>10</sup> These 8 Beatitudes are some of the key values of the Kingdom of Heaven; they describe 8 things that God values.<sup>11</sup> They are virtues that He wants to build into our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Although Stott penned these words back in the late 1970’s, they are just as true in 2019.

<sup>2</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1978, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew’s Gospel lays out five key discourses or teaching sections. Matthew 5-7, The Sermon on the Mount, is the 1st and longest of these five. Luke 6:20-49 is a parallel passage referred to as the “Sermon on the Plain.” These are very likely the same sermon but Matthew and Luke each record the particular details that were most beneficial to their particular Gospel account and its purpose and priorities. See discussion by D. A. Carson in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Rev. Ed.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, pp. 154-155 and the top of 159.

<sup>4</sup> Also “the [eventual] removal from the world of all the consequences of sin...and the creation of a new order of righteousness and peace.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1593.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew writes to instruct us, but also to encourage us and to inspire us as Christ-followers toward meaningful, daily discipleship. In this present age, you and I are privileged to enjoy the blessings of the new covenant which include: genuine forgiveness of our sins, power to overcome temptation and to endure persecution, opportunity to help rescue those who are still lost in spiritual darkness, & freedom to live our lives deeply rooted in obedience to Jesus’ teachings. Carson, D. A., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Rev. Ed.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> “teaching...proclaiming...healing. Jesus’ three-fold ministry. The synagogues provided a place for him to teach on the Sabbath. During the week he preached to larger crowds in the open air.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1598.

<sup>7</sup> The sermon on the mount may not have preceded Jesus’ circuit in Mt. 4:23-25 but rather have been during that circuit. Carson, D. A., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Rev. Ed.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, bottom right corner of p. 154.

<sup>8</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1598.

<sup>9</sup> The 12 aren’t listed ‘til chapter 10. Carson, D. A., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Rev. Ed.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 158.

<sup>10</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1599.

<sup>11</sup> “These kingdom blessings ... [reveal] God’s gracious favor toward his followers, for traits that are opposite of what usually garner acclaim and popularity.” *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1937.

And as we allow God to build these virtues into our lives, they will not only result in God blessing us, but they will enable us to become a blessing to others.<sup>12</sup>

Well, with that introduction, let's dive into these 8 beatitudes: Jesus states the 1<sup>st</sup> Beatitude in Mt. 5:3, **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."** One writer had a good definition for "poor in spirit:" "to acknowledge spiritual bankruptcy" and to confess one's "unworthiness before God and utter dependence on him.... Those who are so 'poor' they know they can offer nothing."<sup>13</sup> Our human tendency is to assume that the ones who are truly blessed are those who are rich with self-confidence, those who are highly competent, and those who are able to do things by means of their own personal fortitude. But Jesus says just the opposite.<sup>14</sup> We dare not approach this list of the 8 beatitudes as one more list of things we need to work on. This is not about "pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps" and getting it done. I think that's why Jesus puts this particular beatitude 1<sup>st</sup> in the list. God's favor and blessing<sup>15</sup> rest on those who are poor in spirit. "Poor in spirit" is written in direct "contrast to the spiritually proud and self-sufficient." The Kingdom of Heaven does NOT belong to those who believe that they can be righteous by their own efforts.

Later in Matthew's Gospel, we read the story of the time when Matthew Himself was sitting at his tax collector's booth. This is back when Matthew was still spiritually lost. Jesus then invites Matthew to follow Him and Matthew says "yes I will follow you Jesus!" Jesus and Matthew then have dinner together at Matthew's house. There were a bunch of other tax collectors and sinners at this same meal and Jesus is criticized for eating among them. Jesus gives a wonderful response in Matthew 9:12-13, "On hearing this, Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'" The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are "poor in spirit." To those who understand their desperate spiritual poverty. Our righteous deeds get us nowhere. All we can do is fall at the feet of Jesus and plead for His mercy, receiving His forgiveness by grace through faith. Jesus' kingdom is a gift, not a reward.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is not just for the spiritually elite or the highly educated or the intensely disciplined.<sup>17</sup> So the question is: Do you know just how spiritually poor you are today? How desperately you are in need of God's rescue? Apart from Christ, our poverty is immense!

Jesus goes on to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Beatitude in Mt. 5:4, **"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."**<sup>18</sup> This is a reference to mourning over sin. An authentic admission of our spiritual bankruptcy in v. 3, goes hand in hand with grieving over sin.<sup>19</sup> Our prayer resonates with the man in Luke 18:13, "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" Here's the benefit for those who mourn: comfort. This comfort comes in the form of genuine forgiveness of sin and the removal of guilt and shame. God blesses those who mourn over sin. Those who take sin seriously. Their own sin, but also the sins of others: the sin in their families, their workplaces, their schools, and their community. A Christian worldview is one that is saddened by the problems in the world; we grieve for this world, because we understand that its pain and chaos, is a direct result of its fallen state. Therefore, as we reach out to help with the world's problems, that help is informed by a kingdom perspective.<sup>20</sup> This world will not last forever, but while we are here, we are God's agents of hope and healing to a world that has been totally decimated by sin.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Beatitude is in Mt. 5:5, **"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."**<sup>21</sup> "Meekness" can be defined as "Those who humbly acknowledge their dependence on the... grace of God and [show] no arrogance toward others."<sup>22</sup> Meekness is not so much an attitude toward people as it is a humility before God.<sup>23</sup> A deep, foundational reverence for God, informs our approach to everything else in life. Our

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<sup>12</sup> "the Matthean beatitudes are formally declarative but implicitly hortatory." Carson, D. A., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Rev. Ed.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 160.

<sup>13</sup> Consider Luke 18:9-14. Carson, D. A., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Rev. Ed.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 162.

<sup>14</sup> Note in Matthew 18:1-5, the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the one who takes the lowly position of a child.

<sup>15</sup> μακάριος = "pertaining to being especially favored, blessed, fortunate, happy, privileged...of humans privileged recipient of divine favor." Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., pp. 610-611). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>16</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1599.

<sup>17</sup> In fact, it's often a lot harder for those kinds of people to enter the kingdom. Probably because they feel they might have so much more to lose by surrendering to God. Their pride and ego create an aversion to any kind of kingdom that encourages things like poverty, mourning, and meekness.

<sup>18</sup> Consider Psalm 139:136.

<sup>19</sup> See D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Rev. Ed.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 163.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., when we feed and clothe those in financial need, we help from a generous spirit that has experienced the generosity of God in our own lives.

<sup>21</sup> This probably refers back to Psalm 37:11.

<sup>22</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 896. You can tell it's a kingdom virtue, just by the beauty and power of its definition!

<sup>23</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1599.

Lord Jesus Himself is our greatest example of meekness.<sup>24</sup> During His earthly life, He consistently and fully submitted Himself to obedience to God's will. His life gives us a clear snapshot of what our lives ought to look like.<sup>25</sup> God blesses those who are meek. NOT those who think that they are better than others, NOT those who demand their own way. In the kingdom of heaven, meekness is valued. The last will be first... and the last, the least, the meek - they will inherit the earth.<sup>26</sup>

Jesus goes on to the 4<sup>th</sup> Beatitude in Mt. 5:6, "**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.**" This is not a physical hunger and thirst. This is a spiritual thirst, a thirst of the soul. This is a hungry passion and desire for God's will and God's ways.<sup>27</sup> This spiritual appetite of the soul can feast on the righteousness of God. Not our own righteousness, but the righteousness that comes from God and is through Christ.<sup>28</sup> This desire for God's righteousness includes a deep longing for His justice, for things to be made right in this world.<sup>29</sup> The range of meaning for this word "righteousness" extends beyond just personal righteousness behavior, to also include social justice. In other words, people who thrive under the reign of God, take on a deep compassion for the oppressed, the abused, and the marginalized. This is a value and virtue in the kingdom of heaven. And this appetite will be satisfied as God works through his kingdom people. Just to be clear, like many of the beatitudes, even though there is a genuine and present reality to them, there is also a certain limit in the degree to which we will see them fulfilled in this life. These kingdom realities will not come fully, until the final consummation of Christ's kingdom when He returns in glory.<sup>30</sup> (*This is the now/not yet reality*)

The 5<sup>th</sup> Beatitude is found in Mt. 5:7, "**Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.**"<sup>31</sup> One of our women's Bible studies will soon start digging into the NT book of James. The study is titled, "Mercy Triumphs."<sup>32</sup> That's such an important distinctive of the Kingdom of Heaven. John Stott nicely synthesizes being meek with being merciful: "For to be meek is to acknowledge to others that WE are sinners; to be merciful is to have compassion on others, for THEY are sinners too."<sup>33</sup> Later on in Matthew 18:21-35, Matthew records Jesus' parable of the Unmerciful Servant. Jesus explains how the Kingdom of Heaven is like a master who takes pity on his servant and cancels his debt. Then, that very same servant, goes out and finds a fellow servant who owes him money and demands immediate repayment. He has the guy thrown in jail! When the master hears about this he says, "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"<sup>34</sup> Here is a distinctive of the Kingdom of Heaven: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."

The 6<sup>th</sup> Beatitude is in Mt. 5:8, "**Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.**"<sup>35</sup> When the Bible speaks of the heart it refers to "the center of the human spirit, from which spring emotions, thoughts, motivations, courage and action."<sup>36</sup> The Kingdom of Heaven calls us and forms us into people with pure hearts, meaning pure thoughts, pure motives, and pure actions. This is a purity well beyond mere external piety or ceremonial cleanness. It is utterly sincere with no hint of hypocrisy.<sup>37</sup> This, again, is only possible as God cleanses us and renews us through the progressive sanctification of the HS.<sup>38</sup> We'll talk about this one more in a future sermon.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Beatitude is found in Mt. 5:9, "**Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.**"<sup>39</sup> D. A. Carson describes this well: "Instead of delighting in division... disciples of Jesus delight to make peace wherever possible. Making peace is not appeasement. The true model is God's costly peacemaking [through Christ]... the heirs of the kingdom, who, meek and poor in spirit, loving righteousness yet merciful, are especially equipped for peacemaking..."<sup>40</sup> Peacemaking is a virtue of true

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<sup>24</sup> See Matthew 11:29-30 and 21:5.

<sup>25</sup> Graham Kendrick writes about Jesus' humility in his song, "Meekness and Majesty." (ThankYou Music)

<sup>26</sup> See Revelation 21:1. NOTE: Not this present earth, but the new heaven and the new earth. They INHERIT the earth as a gift from God. In other words, they don't work for it or fight to take possession of it. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 896.

<sup>27</sup> See Psalm 42:2 and 63:1.

<sup>28</sup> This ties back nicely to v. 3; the "poor in spirit" recognize their need for a righteousness that they cannot attain by their own effort or goodness. Religion tells us what we must do to make ourselves righteous. But the key to the Kingdom of Heaven is a relationship with the king. Jesus alone is the One who makes us clean before God. See Romans 3:22, Phil. 1:11 & 3:9.

<sup>29</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1599.

<sup>30</sup> See Acts 1:11 & 1 Thes. 4:16-18 & D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Rev. Ed.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 164.

<sup>31</sup> "The reward is not mercy shown by others but by God." D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Rev. Ed.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 164.

<sup>32</sup> See James 2:12-13, "**Mercy triumphs over judgment.**"

<sup>33</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1978, p. 48.

<sup>34</sup> See Proverbs 21:13 and James 2:8.

<sup>35</sup> Exodus 33:20-23 indicates we can see God's back and live. Also consider Genesis 16:13, Hebrews 12:14, 1 John 3:1-3, and Revelation 21:22-27.

<sup>36</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 861.

<sup>37</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Rev. Ed.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 164.

<sup>38</sup> See Ephesians 5:25-27.

<sup>39</sup> See James 3:17-18.

<sup>40</sup> Carson, D. A., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Rev. Ed.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 165.

Christ-followers. As God children, we are particularly well-equipped to be peacemakers. We actually talked about this idea quite a bit, back in December, so I'm going to move us on to the 8<sup>th</sup> and final Beatitude...

Mt. 5:10-12 says, "**Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.** Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Out of all the Beatitudes in the list, only this last one, the one found in verse 10, goes on to articulate more detail. Jesus now says not just "blessed are THOSE" but "blessed are YOU." He gets more personal, more direct. The persecution "because of righteousness" in verse 10 is further specified in verse 11 as persecution "because of me." That is, the insults and the evil sayings against you, are because of your association with Jesus. Put another way, faithfulness to Jesus sets us up for persecution.<sup>41</sup> This was true 2,000 years ago and it is still true today.

I found a rather challenging thought in the footnotes of my *NIV Study Bible*. It suggests that "persecution provides an opportunity for believers to prove their fitness for the kingdom."<sup>42</sup> That's a pretty challenging idea, persecution provides an opportunity to prove our fitness for the kingdom. I think that they are onto something here. At particular times throughout Jesus' ministry, it does seem like He would say something to test whether his disciples were truly devoted to Him and to His teachings.<sup>43</sup> Following Jesus is not a call to an easy life. We SHOULD expect some persecution. There are many things that are appealing about the Kingdom of Heaven, but the reality of persecution is NOT one of them. Let's appreciate the fact that Jesus tells people this sobering reality at the beginning of His Sermon on the Mount. This is what we call "full disclosure;" understand what you're getting into, BEFORE you sign up for the Kingdom of Heaven.

You may be thinking: "Wow Pastor Jerry, you know, I was pretty interested in the Kingdom of Heaven... right up until the end there. All this talk of being comforted, inheriting the earth, and being shown mercy sounded really good. You're losing me here though." I know; I get it. But this wasn't my idea. This isn't even my sermon. This is Jesus' sermon. I'm not interested in softening Jesus' message or in making it more palatable for us.<sup>44</sup> Frankly, these 8 Beatitudes CAN BE a little intimidating.<sup>45</sup> And that final one on persecution has a pretty sobering impact as the closer. And yet, the Kingdom of Heaven is still SO compelling. Can't you feel it drawing you in? The more we truly understand the beauty and majesty of the Good News that Jesus is proclaiming, the less a temporary thing like persecution will deter us.

These 8 Beatitudes are some of the key values of the Kingdom of Heaven; they describe 8 things that God values. They are virtues that He wants to build into our lives. And as we allow God to build these virtues into our lives, they will not only result in God blessing us, but they will enable us to become a blessing to others. (*A Kingdom people who have a Kingdom impact!*)

The Kingdom of Heaven is incredible! It's the reign of God that brings many blessings; it brings comfort, mercy, purity, peace, and the ultimate satisfaction that our souls so desperately need. And here's some great news: membership is currently available, it can be ours! Through Christ, the Kingdom of Heaven is near!<sup>46</sup> May God's Kingdom come, may His will be done in Bemidji as it is in heaven. Amen.

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji  
on January 20, 2019 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson*

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<sup>41</sup> See Carson, D. A., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Rev. Ed.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 167.

<sup>42</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1599.

<sup>43</sup> We talked about one of those times from John 6 two weeks back. See John 6:66-69. See also Matthew 8:18-20, 10:38-39, and 2 Timothy 3:12.

<sup>44</sup> As John Stott notes: "nothing is more necessary for the life, health and growth of Christians than that they should hear what the Spirit is saying to them through this ancient yet ever modern-Word." John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1978, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> "The moral and ethical standard called for in the Sermon on the Mount is so high that some have dismissed the Sermon on the Mount as being completely unrealistic or have projected its fulfillment to the future kingdom...however...Jesus (and Matthew) gave the Sermon as a standard for all Christians, realizing that its demands cannot be met in our own power." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1599.

<sup>46</sup> The Beatitudes describe the "Way to Be" because this is how all of us want "Life to be." Although we are geographically located in the Kingdom of this World, as Christ-followers we choose to embrace the virtues & values of the Kingdom of Heaven. It's the "Way to Be!"