

The Beatitudes stand at the start of the Sermon on the Mount like angels of mercy at the side of those who suffer deprivation. The impoverished, the grief-stricken, the powerless, and the unrighteous receive a welcome from the living and true God they never dreamed of having. No wonder people were astonished at our Lord's teaching. (Matthew 7:28) No wonder people said He taught with authority. (Matthew 7:28) No wonder they said, **"No one ever spoke the way this man does."** (John 7:46)

These nine blessings shape the way we experience God. They open us to God the way flowers open and follow the sun across the heavens. They shape the way we experience people, all people, because any person in his worst moment may find himself standing in a sudden shower of God's blessings. The Beatitudes place us on the side of the poor, the suffering, the disadvantaged, the underdogs, the people who just had the rug pulled out from under them, the people who have come down in the world, and who are feeling their loss. The Father is on their side. He is the Angel of Mercy at their side in deprivation. If that is where we find the Father, why would we want to be anywhere else?

### The Poor in Spirit

**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.** It is helpful to remember that Jesus, the master Teacher, repeated Himself. The Gospel of Matthew may report something Jesus said, as if He said it only one time. That's because in a book we can go back as often as we want and read what He said. It doesn't work like that in face-to-face conversation. People forget and have to be reminded. New people show up who haven't heard it, and Jesus had to tell them, even if other people had heard it a dozen times. Repetition is one reason so much of what He said stuck.

And people remembered what He said differently, and maybe He gave slightly different versions on different occasions. It is helpful to compare Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, when they report the same incident. It is especially interesting when they report it in significantly different ways. The Beatitudes are a case in point. Matthew and Luke give an account of Jesus' Beatitudes. They are significantly different. They are blessedly different, and we don't have to give up either version.

For example, the first Beatitude is almost identical in Matthew and Luke, but not quite, and the differences are significant. In Luke 6:20 Jesus says, **"Blessed are you."** That's very direct, very personal. The audience and the occasion were specific. **"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."** Here in Matthew 5:3 Jesus says, **"Blessed are the poor."** That's very general. The audience and the occasion are vague. And Matthew added two powerful words. **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."** Luke clearly meant the economically poor. I am sure Jesus meant the economically poor. Matthew clearly meant what is going on in a person's soul. I am sure Jesus meant what was going on in a person's soul. Jesus probably said it both ways at different times. Remember, Jesus repeated Himself.

Here's why both versions are important. A person can be poor as in grinding poverty and have a haughty spirit toward God and his fellow man. Justice requires those who have means to do it to feed and clothe and shelter and heal him, however haughty he may be. But he is not poor in spirit. On the other hand a person can be rich in worldly goods and be poor in spirit. God is at his side to show him favor and give him protection.

Many of us felt our spiritual poverty last Sunday when Jesus said, **"But I tell you: Love your enemies."** The enemy is the person who harms you and the people you love.

It's the person that disrespects you, undercuts you, and slanders you. We hear Jesus and we say, "It's not possible. I can't do that." Nothing in us wants to love our enemy. Nothing in us wants to try.

Don't waste moments like that by defying Christ. Acknowledge the goodness of Jesus' command to love your enemies. Acknowledge its binding authority over your life, and let your sense of spiritual poverty stand without qualification. When you reach the end of your rope and realize with remorse that you want nothing more to do with Jesus' command, that's what spiritual poverty feels like. In that moment God's favor shines on you, and He has something good for you you don't deserve and don't expect."

However, that moment when we see how morally impoverished we really are, how little we care about other people – that is precisely the moment we want to give up. "Love my enemies? I don't think so. It's impossible. That's not the real world. Count me out! Don't bother me with cockamamie, do-good foolishness. You're wasting my time." But that moment, that awful moment, when people see how morally impoverished they are, is a moment of beatitude. It is a moment of liberation from self-righteousness and small-deception. You are never closer to God than when you feel farthest from God, and it breaks your heart. That is the liberating truth of the first Beatitude.

### **The Grief-stricken, the Powerless, and the Unrighteous**

Jesus addressed the second Beatitude to the grief-stricken. **Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.** We mourn in the face of death and in the face of pain that finds no relief. We mourn at separation and loss. We mourn at the damage evil does to people. We mourn when we are powerless to do anything about those evils.

As he so often did, C. S. Lewis got into words the mourning most of us feel but can't say very well. He wrote these words after his wife of less than three years died of cancer. "It is hard to have patience with people who say, 'There is no death' or 'Death doesn't matter'. There is death. And whatever matters. And whatever happens has consequences, and it and they are irrevocable and irreversible. You might as well say that birth doesn't matter. I look up at the night sky. Is anything more certain than that in all those vast times and spaces, if I were allowed to search them, I should nowhere find her face, her voice, her touch? She died. She is dead. Is the word so difficult to learn?" (*A Grief Observed*, 16)

Lewis was right. It is when this or that particular evil is "irrevocable and irreversible" that we mourn. Jesus was right. You are never closer to God than when you mourn like that. In that sorrow God's favor shines on you, and He has comfort for you you don't deserve and don't expect." That is the truth of the second Beatitude.

**Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.** Before we glorify the meek or vilify the meek, we need to know that the third Beatitude is about the powerless. They are "the unaggressive, the timid, or those who do not claim all they can get." (Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 1, loc 3561, Kindle e-book) We don't want to be like that. We say of someone like that, who can be easily imposed on, who is submissive to the people around him, "He is as meek as a mouse." And in our hearts we despise him. The meek do not get ahead in the world. "You've got to lead, follow, or get out of the way." Really? Are those the only options? If you think they are, what do you do with the third Beatitude?

Before you dismiss it altogether, stay with me for a couple of minutes. Many years ago, a man in this church had responsibilities that allowed him to have a key to the

building and almost every room in it. I visited that man several times as his health failed. On one occasion I said, "I think you may still have a church key. Since you can't do what you used to do, could I have it back?" He had anguish on his face. "Do I have to?" "Yes, I think it's better. If you get well, you can have it back." He knew he wasn't going to get well. He fumbled in a drawer, where he had hidden the key. He gave it to me and then he stunned me. He gave me another key and said, "This is the key to the church we attended before we came to BVBC. Would you return it for me?"

Giving up those keys was an admission of powerlessness. It was to become an outsider. Many of you know what that's like on both sides of the desk. Your boss along with security meets you in your office first thing in the morning, tells you to clean out your desk, hand over your keys, and immediately leave the building, accompanied by security. In an instant you become an outsider, powerless to change what has happened. You walk out of that building as meek as a mouse.

In that moment, if only for a moment, you take your place among the meek of the earth. In that moment, if only for a moment, you experience the powerlessness that millions of your fellow Americans experience everyday. In that moment you are not far from the kingdom of God. Don't waste moments like that. Acknowledge the goodness of the third Beatitude. Acknowledge its binding authority over your life, and let your sense of powerlessness stand without qualification. When you reach the end of your rope like that, God's favor shines on you, and He has something good for you you don't deserve and don't expect. That's the truth of the third Beatitude.

**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.** I have spoken about those moments when people see how morally impoverished they really are, how little they care about other people. In moments like that people want to give up. "Seek first the kingdom of God? Love my enemies? I don't think so. It's impossible. I've tried and failed and tried again and failed. That's not the real world. Count me out! You're wasting my time." I get it. No one likes failure, especially moral failure. The fourth Beatitude says there is an alternative to giving up.

The alternative is to hunger and thirst for what you don't have and think you will never have. Hunger and thirst are the most elemental, physical needs we have. Go without food for three or four days, and you will feel its elemental power asserting itself in your body. Hunger and thirst for righteousness asserts itself only when a person realizes how unrighteous he is but still wants to be righteous.

This Beatitude and the first Beatitude, **Blessed are the poor in spirit**, are indispensable for what comes next in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:17-48 Jesus radicalizes respectable morality. We got a taste of it last week when Jesus said, **"Love your enemies."**

I want to caution you again: If you experience what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount as an obligation to be met or a burden to be carried, it will crush you. But if you experience it as an invitation to soar, it will set your heart on fire with joy. You will experience it as an invitation to soar only if the first and fourth Beatitudes are fully operational in your soul. They are the safety net when we fail.

Christ knows our capacity for evil, our moral mediocrity, and our willingness to be content with both. Our failures are part of His plan, but so is His challenge to **be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.** (Matthew 5:48) He really wants us to do something to love our enemies. He really wants us to think well of other people in our

hearts. He really wants us to banish lust from our hearts, and so on. And when our best efforts to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect crash and burn, and we see our moral poverty with piercing clarity and with regret, He is there to say, **“Blessed are the poor in spirit.”** And when in spite of our moral poverty, we still hunger and thirst to pursue the Father’s desire for us to be perfect, He is there to say, **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”** That is the truth of the fourth Beatitude.

### Take Away

Jesus said over and over, **“The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.”** (Mark 1:15) In other words, watch Jesus, and you will see what God’s authority looks like in human life. Watch Jesus, and you will see God’s priorities on display. And as the Beatitudes make clear, God’s authority will contradict human authority, and His priorities will contradict our priorities.

Unlikely disciples become extravagant disciples as they allow themselves to be corrected by the Lord they follow. They learn sooner or later that His thoughts are not their thoughts, and His ways are not their ways. They learn sooner or later that they are doing Him no favors by following Him. He is pouring out the new wine of heaven. It remains to be seen, if His disciples then and His disciples now are wineskins that can stretch and not split under the pressure of His expanding presence in their experience.

The One who brought the presence of God to the impoverished, the grief-stricken, the powerless, and the unrighteous is here with us in our reading of the Gospel of Matthew. We hold in our hands the revelation of Him who said to then and He says now, **“Watch me, and you will see what God is like. God is with you. Don’t miss Him!”**

We won’t miss Him, if we keep in step with the Holy Spirit. We keep in step with the Spirit, when we make it our life’s ambition to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect, and simultaneously we trust our Father’s mercy in the face of our repeated moral failures. There are many ways to do this. Let’s talk about one of them.

I would like you to write three teachings of Jesus in your permanent memory. They are: **“Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”** **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”** **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”** Before we leave the presence of God this morning, let’s begin to write them on our hearts. Follow my lead for a few minutes, and you will be pleased at how much progress we make together.

I will start. **“Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”** Now, let’s all say it together: **“Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”**

Next: **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”** Now, let’s all say it together: **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”**

Now, let’s say the first two together, starting with **“Be perfect.”** Ready? **“Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”** And: **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”**

Next: **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”** Now, let’s all say it together. **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”**

Now, let's say all three together, starting with **“Be perfect.”** Ready? **“Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”** And: **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”** And: **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”** Let them be your first waking thoughts each day this week.