

jesus

teaching

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by andrew paul cannon

The Beatitudes

I feel like a resident alien on this planet. I don't really enjoy the things that other people enjoy and I feel like there must be more to living. Don't you feel that way? The world we live in promises opportunity, wealth, pleasure, some degree of safety, and the pursuit of happiness. If I were concerned only with my own pleasure, riches, or happiness, there would be much here for me. It seems to me like many other people are fulfilled with these things. People have found all sorts of ways to be gratified. None of it appeals to me. I want to do more than merely occupy myself until my death. I don't really fit in. The world doesn't offer what I want.

Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" is probably the most famous and most quoted from sermon in the whole of the Bible. Jesus has called at least His first apostles according to Matthew's Gospel. He is now traveling and performing miracles. News about Him is spreading. In this sermon, Jesus unmask planet earth and all of her false promises and calls us to a life that means more than sex, riches, success, or a higher education.

Read Matthew 4:23-5:12¹

Jesus taught Old Testament ideals

In the beatitudes, Jesus does not explicitly quote the Old Testament. The language does, though, allude to Isaiah 61:1-3. Before considering the beatitudes we will read this

¹ Unreferenced quotations below are from this passage.

passage in Isaiah's prophecy about God's restoration of an Israelite remnant after the exile.

Violence will not be heard again in your land, Nor devastation or destruction within your borders; But you will call your walls salvation, and your gates praise. No longer will you have the sun for light by day, Nor for brightness will the moon give you light; But you will have the Lord for an everlasting light, And your God for your glory. Your sun will no longer set, Nor will your moon wane; For you will have the Lord for an everlasting light, And the days of your mourning will be over. Then all your people *will be* righteous; They will possess the land forever, The branch of My planting, The work of My hands, That I may be glorified. The smallest one will become a clan, And the least one a mighty nation.

I, the Lord, will hasten it in its time." The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, Because the Lord has anointed me To bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives And freedom to prisoners; To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, To grant those who mourn *in Zion*, Giving them a garland instead of ashes, The oil of gladness instead of mourning, The mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. So they will be called oaks of righteousness, The planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified.

God would restore His nation for His own glory. In the beatitudes, Jesus would be making these promises to His spiritual people. We see that Israel was a living parable for all of the work that Jesus would do in building His church. Here on planet earth, we centralize all of life around ourselves. In reality, God has structured His creation for His glory, not ours. The two ways are incompatible. No wonder we feel more and more unfulfilled the more gratification we achieve.

The Beatitudes

As we read through these beatitudes, it will be good for us to know that they are not imperatives. That word, imperatives, means commands. The beatitudes are not listed rules for us to follow so that we might be morally right or gain the rewards listed. They are declarative statements, or statements of fact. They are not prescriptive but descriptive and not commands or promises of material wealth. Let's look together.

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

In Luke's Gospel, this statement is recorded a little differently. Luke quotes Jesus as simply saying, “Blessed are the poor” (Luke 6:20). There seems to be a sense in which those who are materially deprived and as a result suffer in their poorness of spirit are blessed according to Christ's words. I don't think this merely refers to a form of downtroddenness because that is the next beatitude mentioned by Jesus. I think it does refer to a literal poorness, though it is tempting to justify our having much because we live in a wealthy nation. This does not mean

that all impoverished people will be saved or that all wealthy people are condemned. There does seem to be some way in which Christ's blessing is for those who have no ownership in the things of this world. This makes sense if Jesus is alluding to Isaiah 61. This earth is spiritual exile for the church. In the resurrection the people of God who were "impoverished" will be restored and enriched and God alone will receive all glory for accomplishing His work by His own hands.

Later in Matthew's Gospel we will read about how, in order to follow Christ, we must give up everything (Matthew 16:24). We will read about how it is impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 19:24). We will read about how some part of our heavenly reward is an exponential increase of what we gave up to follow Christ (Matthew 19:29).

This is a deeply convicting description for someone like me who has more than absolutely needed. It is deeply convicting for every self-proclaiming Christian in the West. It is convicting for church bodies who actually have places to meet, resources of any kind, and even the simple ability to buy and make coffee for themselves when they meet.

While, on planet earth, we are trying to fill our ministries, churches, and households with more stuff, better coffee, and newer attractions, Christ is saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

This particular verse isn't a command to become poor or poor in spirit. It does call to mind God's glory, Christ's work, and our tendency to define ourselves according to and attach ourselves to our wealth. No matter what I do, let me spend the money that God gives me for God's kingdom and not for my own. This application is for both individuals and church bodies.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

Those who are downtrodden, who weep, who grieve, who experience sadness or depression are blessed in the same sense. Everyone who mourns is not necessarily saved, and everyone who only experiences happiness is not necessarily condemned. There is coming a day for the people of God (evident in Isaiah) when, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

“Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.”

To be gentle is to have a meek spirit. This demeanor reflects the heart of someone who is not overbearing, forceful, accusatory, or overly critical of everything. Though there are times when the people of God must guard Biblical truth in a genuine way, even expelling those who are proven to be false teachers and having nothing to do with those who are divisive (1 Timothy 1, 4, Titus 3), it is those who are meek who are blessed. Those who are meek maintain a heart of repentance and live as though they are the lowly of the low. This is difficult because it creates every opportunity for people to take advantage of us, to belittle us, and to walk all over us. This is reflective of Psalm 37:11.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

Those who hunger and thirst for true righteousness are those who do not seek to be self-righteous. Self-righteousness is something that we have of ourselves. True righteousness is something to be hungered and thirsted for. It is something external and something to be satisfied with.

To be self-righteous is to rely on what comes from within the person. If I am looking for what I think or believe to be confirmed, if I am working for my salvation, if I am accomplishing the work of God, or if I believe my personal worldview to be the only correct one, then I might be self-righteous.

To hunger and thirst for true righteousness is to long for true understanding, to have faith that God is working out our salvation, to yearn for God to accomplish His work in us, and to long for God to be sanctifying us or changing us until we are complete creatures. This is what we mean when we use the phrase, *Semper Reformanda*.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”

To be merciful is not to treat people according to their wrongs. This idea is described more fully in Matthew 7:1-12 in the context of criticizing others. Mercy is not easy because we really like to pounce and to prove our superiority.

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

This is the same language that is used in Psalm 24:1-6, which indicates that a pure heart has to do with honesty and sincerity in living. According to the Psalm, such people will receive a blessing from the Lord and will

receive righteousness from the God of their salvation. To be pure of heart is not to be perfectly moral or pious. It is to live honestly, sincerely, and humbly before God and people. To wear a mask, to have some pretend religiosity, and to hide our struggles theologically and practically in an effort to make ourselves look spiritual or knowledgeable or wise, is the opposite of what it means to have a pure heart. Yet on planet earth, these are exactly the things we do, the very things that are celebrated.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

To be a peacemaker literally means to make peace. Paul would instruct the church in this way:

“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of *God*, for it is written,

‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. ‘But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:18-21).

Paul quotes from both Deuteronomy 32:35 and 2 Kings 6:22. The idea is not that we won’t have enemies, but

that the people of God live peacefully with all people and, as far as it depends on them, make peace in every context.

“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Since this is not a command, we are not instructed to flagellate, intentionally cause self-harm, or to place ourselves under persecution for the sake of being persecuted. This is a blessing for those who are persecuted for the sake of the righteousness mentioned earlier in the beatitudes and for those who are insulted, persecuted, and falsely accused because of Christ.

These are groups of persons who are blessed by the fulfillment of the Law in Jesus (5:17) and who are secure in that blessing. Even though these are not commands or imperatives, I am both encouraged and convicted by each one of these statements. Let us consider our ways.

Throughout His ministry Jesus was the perfect embodiment of these traits. He had no place to lay His head, though there were ministry funds. He wept, though He also experienced great joy. He was meek, though He was stern as He rebuked those who claimed to love God and yet turned people toward the words of men rather than the words of God alone (Matthew 23:3). Jesus fulfilled all righteousness. Jesus was merciful. Jesus was pure in heart. Jesus was a peacemaker, though the truth divided people (Matthew 10:34). Jesus was persecuted and killed for the

sake of righteousness. Jesus was insulted and falsely accused.

Here on planet earth, Jesus didn't fit in. His values are not the values of earth people, yet He dwelt among us. He became the resident alien so that we might know the Father through Him.