

## BLESSINGS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE KINGDOM

Virgil Warren, PhD

The first portion of Matthew **5-7** has to do with the first “petal on our daisy”: Blessings and Responsibilities (**5:3-16**). Before looking at the meaning of the verses individually, we must see how the structure of the sermon may affect its interpretation. Since it is wisdom literature, it is loosely structured. The significance of this point can be appreciated by looking at Luke’s Sermon on the Plain (**6:20-49**), which has several close parallels with the Sermon on the Mount. Despite similarities many interpreters consider them different presentations, partly because they may fall at different points in Jesus’ ministry. Regardless of whether they are two accounts of the same sermon or different accounts of two sermons, Luke’s rearrangement of similar material shows that we should be cautious about making too much out of connectors between blocks of material. In other words, context connections in wisdom literature are less helpful in interpretation, because the writer tends to connect his paragraphs more loosely. They are self-contained units more than interdependent ones. In yet other places Luke has bits and pieces that appear in Matthew **5-7**. Luke **13:22-24ff.** compares with Matthew **7:21-23** on the judgment scene and the narrow gate. Luke **16:17-18** parallels Matthew **5:18** and **32**, which includes the “jot and tittle” statement and the ethics of marriage. The connections we see between portions of the sermon may not have been as strong in Jesus’ mind as they might look to us. The structure of Matthew’s account may be more apparent than real. Observations based on sequence and association may be well to make, but their validity probably rests more on the nature of adjacent subjects than on their placement.

For purposes of comment, we are combining the beatitudes (**5:3-12**) and the salt and light sayings (**5:13-16**). That pairs together blessings and responsibilities. Being blessed results from participation with God and his purposes for us. Responsibilities also belong to our privileged status as his sons. Balancing blessings and responsibilities removes any self-centeredness that comes from concentrating too much on what we get to the neglect of what we should give. We have good things to enjoy; we also have a job to do. There is both favor and mission.

In the beatitudes the first thing that meets the eye is the repeated word *blessed*. It occurs nine times in regard to eight different aspects of the state of the blessed. “Blessed” people are hungry for righteousness, they are merciful and pure in heart, they are peacemakers. A person wants these things, and *blessedness* means something that covers such things. But it is striking that Jesus does not apply *blessedness* simply to the merciful, pure of heart, and peacemakers. He applies it also to the meek and poor in spirit and even to those who mourn and suffer persecution.

We might not expect *blessedness* to apply to these last four matters. Whatever it is, blessedness does not depend on being in good earthly circumstances.

The word *blessed*, used in older translations like the King James and American Standard Versions, does not exactly match the idea found in the original language. Blessing pictures something that one person does to another. Another Greek word would probably have expressed that other notion better. The beatitudes do not all picture one person blessing another, although that is the case with peacemakers and mourners; and it is true that God blesses us. But one person's activity directed at another person is not the main point of the expression, because not all the beatitudes picture one person doing something to another one to bless him. Blessedness comes from realizing God's attitude toward us.

*Happy* is a word used frequently in modern translations, but it too is deficient. Its derivation suggests that "happiness" depends on what "happens." Perhaps that is why *happy* has a lighter, shallower feel. It is not a very good description for the beatitude circumstance, because some beatitudes certainly do not envision shallow circumstances. *Happy* does not easily associate with persecution or mourning.

Two other expressions may be better. *Fortunate* is good because people can be fortunate under both positive and negative conditions—whether they are persecuted or peacemakers. *Well-off* is another expression. A person can be "well-off" in all eight beatitude situations. Someone mourning or poor in spirit, someone meek or persecuted, can be "well-off." The beatitudes call for a positive attitude despite temporal circumstances. We feel like going on, taking hold, trying to accomplish something. Life is worthwhile, and we want to get on with it despite setbacks, frustrations, difficulties, and opposition.

From beyond us comes a supply for inner dynamic, a sense that life is worthwhile despite detracting features. Perhaps we can gain a "feel" of things from Acts 20:35, the only recorded statement of Jesus found outside the gospels: "*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*" More satisfaction comes from giving ourselves or our things than comes from receiving more things. This sense of satisfaction may be even more important than a positive attitude toward life. At any rate, blessedness involves a positive attitude that accompanies a sense of satisfaction in life.

We have been talking about what blessedness is. Now we must learn how to have it. Jesus does not explain the mechanics by which it comes. He simply observes that people can have it even while they mourn because they know they will be comforted. Nevertheless, cues in the beatitudes show how to gain blessedness. It is obtained by identifying with God. He stands above and in control of the sources of persecution, mourning, and strife. He is the basis for boldness in the midst of turmoil.

Identifying with God relates to the appeal to heaven in the first and last beatitudes: “*Blessed are those who have been persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And blessed are you when men reproach you and persecute you. Rejoice and be glad because they persecuted the prophets ahead of you.*” Suffering persecution for righteousness is an indication of your righteousness; otherwise, evil people would not be persecuting you. You can be glad over this proof that you are on God’s side.

The use of *heaven* here especially is characteristic of Matthew’s gospel. Except for five cases (6:33; 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43), Matthew uses the expression *kingdom of heaven* (28 times), even in passages that have parallels in Mark and Luke that say *kingdom of God* (6 times). *Heaven* elsewhere amounts to a substitute term (metonymy) for God. The prodigal son says, “*I have sinned against heaven*” (Luke 15:18, 21). Matthew uses *heaven* at least twice as often (85) as the other gospels (Mark = 19, Luke = 42, John 21).

*Heaven* indicates an orientation that transcends earthly life. If daily experiences are negative and detract from happiness, fun, or entertainment, nothing ultimate is lost. The one we are tied to is in heaven. He stands above all the instability we could feel overwhelmed by. Identifying ourselves with him gives us a transcendent viewpoint—an omniscient perspective. We can look at life from the vantage point of what is stable and unchanging. Identity with God provides stability that would not be present if we were limited to the shifting sands of this world.

*Transcendent* means that God is above flux and threat. *Heaven* gets at the transcendent nature of his rule and kingdom. One reason for choosing this terminology is that Matthew wants to define the kingdom prophesied in the Old Testament and anticipated by the people of Israel. The Jews were pre-conditioned to political thinking and to their pressing hope for liberation from foreign domination. It was easy for them to suppose that the Messianic kingdom was political and that Messiah would bring blessedness by establishing international peace and righteousness in a political system.

*Heaven* contrasts with earth. The kingdom of heaven is not “of this world” (cp. John 18:36). If we buy into it, we can have blessedness whether we are rulers or subjects, rich or poor, and so on. Identifying with God and his heavenly kingdom raises us above the things that make for instability and gives us a power and significance called *blessedness*.

Beatitudes 2 through 7 suggest a second source of blessedness. Jesus appeals to the future in all six cases. Mourners will be comforted, the meek will inherit the earth, the hungry will be fed, the merciful will receive mercy, the pure in heart will see God, and the peacemakers will be called the children of God. The future does not have to be after death or after the return of Messiah. It can be later during time as well as later in eternity. The first source of blessedness appeals to transcendence, which puts us above the flux, instability, and turmoil in this world that

work against blessedness. The second source of blessedness appeals to the future, which gives us hope after the flux, instability, and turmoil that work against blessedness.

Sometimes it is hard to believe that these really are ways to be blessed. Nevertheless, it helps to know that a sickness we are experiencing will not afflict us permanently. In fact, it may be over soon. By keeping the future in mind, we rise above the present. Doing so gives us another way of looking at life that does not lock us into the weaknesses of this order of things. Scripture appeals to the future as a way of bailing out the present. The future gives us a dynamic in the present even though the source of that dynamic is only a present idea about reality yet to come. If we trust God, blessedness settles in upon us, not only because he is more powerful than anything we have to face, but also because he has told us ahead of time that what grieves us now will come to an end and we will be comforted. Future comfort is even sweeter when it is experienced in contrast to former discomfort.

Besides making observations on the beatitudes collectively, we can also comment on them individually. Most of them are easy enough to understand. The first beatitude promises the kingdom of heaven to the poor in spirit. *Poor in spirit* is not very clear, and commentators understand it variously. It probably describes people who recognize their spiritual deficiencies. When we realize that we need to grow because we are not everything we should be, that in itself brings blessedness. We have the hope of heaven despite imperfection. Perhaps “in spirit” should be taken with *blessed* instead of *poor*. That way the statement would indicate that the poor—in material thing—are blessed spiritually.

Those who mourn can feel blessed because they will be comforted. The country where Jesus lived had many reasons for mourning. The ancient world did not have the medicines available to much of the modern world; many died in infancy and in their younger years. There were many widows and orphans who experienced the sorrows that go with such conditions.

The next beatitude addresses the meek. Meekness includes inner security, which removes felt need to clamor for attention to make ourselves feel significant. We can relax enough to be ourselves without worrying that, if we do so, people will consider us insignificant.

“*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness*” is a vivid picture of a people’s desire to be children of the God who is in heaven. Striving after the kind of life he would have us lead glories him and benefits us.

“*Blessed are the merciful.*” Sometimes it is a temptation not to forgive people. It seems easier to hold things against them. But if they discover that we are merciful toward their mistakes, they may be merciful toward ours. God operates on that same principle.

“*Blessed are the pure in heart*” means there must be no deceit in us. Our motives are honorable, and our purpose is to seek God. Peacemakers have a real source of blessedness

because making peace is really enjoyable. Helping to reconcile a couple, a church, or neighbors gives a real sense of fulfillment.

Even in persecution we can count ourselves blessed by remembering that many Old Testament prophets were persecuted. It did not mean that God had abandoned them then or that they were wrong religiously; nor does it mean that God has abandoned us now or that we are out of relationship with him. It means that such things happen when people stand for the truth.

So far, we have been dealing with the beatitudes. The next verses address “responsibilities of the kingdom,” which Jesus sets forth under the imageries of light and salt. Light is a suggestive imagery. We know that when the sun is shining, life seems more vibrant, and we feel more on top of things. Jesus’ point, however, is that light enlightens. It shows us where we are, so we do not get disoriented or hurt ourselves. It shows us where things are, so we can move properly in relationship to them. At all times God’s people serve as a light to those who are not his people. They demonstrate the difference it makes to be God’s offspring.

Salt imagery brings up several possible meanings. Salt preserves, purifies, melts ice, helps keep us healthy. It can be used to put out fire. But Jesus was concerned with salt’s ability to flavor. Christians flavor their communities and their world because they are sources of good influence. Consequently, this segment of the sermon is a mission mandate. Living the blessed life demonstrates that God’s blessing rests on us, and we act responsibly toward life and people.

Living on a hill is like living in a glass house. When we do something, we do not just do something; we teach something. And when we teach something, we do not just teach something; we commend something. Everyday life becomes demonstration evangelism. Even though we are not vocational ministers, we perform an important role in God’s kingdom on a day-in, day-out basis. We do pre-evangelism, preparing the way for proclamation evangelism. People watch us for a long time to see what kind of enlightenment and flavoring we are before they are willing to listen sensitively to us or anyone who comes to them with proclamation. Proclamation announces the salvation message and urges people to accept Jesus as Messiah and identify themselves with God through him. Consequently, all of us serve a vital preliminary role in our calling as God’s people. During hard times people are more open to the gospel. Our long-time preparation fosters later receptivity. Otherwise, those people will turn to something else in times of change and uncertainty. Presence evangelism results even unintentionally from our obedience to God in the world.

Verses 3-16 talk about the blessedness that comes from identifying with God above and from anticipating the future when he brings everything to fruition. Belonging to God makes us well-off right now even in negative circumstances. In turn, blessedness feeds into our responsibility to be light and salt in the world.