

# A Middle Eastern Context for Interpreting the Christ

## The Beatitudes

### Matthew 5:1-12

The Beatitudes are remarkable! They pulse with the spiritual values ever emanating from the heart of God. In them, we are given a picture of true success far distant from worldly priorities and selfish ambitions. The Beatitudes bring us near to God in ways surpassed only by observing the life of the Christ.

#### Background

- The Beatitudes reveal the character of God's holiness (cf. Lev. 19:2)
- Their key word "blessed" refers to a state of good fortune and grace enjoyed by those immersed in their concepts, thus calling for the pronunciation "bless-ed."
- They speak to God's children rather than being evangelistic in primary design.
- Their primary sources are the Prophets and Wisdom Literature—they are ancient, eternal in nature.
- They speak of the spiritual joy ever growing in the lives of kingdom citizens.
- They represent the content of the repentant heart.
- They produce world-changing influence, a powerful picture of religious completeness, and eternal values rooted in God's nature.
- In them, we find paradox—they are a stark contrast to this world's thinking.
- They produce a life far exceeding that of a well-behaved secular life or an unconverted religious person.
- The Beatitudes serve as a purpose statement for Jesus' ministry.
- Matthew's Gospel was Jewish, but it was also transitional.
- Their being given on a mountain relates to Moses, but they come without the terror of the Mosaic experience (cf. Heb. 12:18-24)
- Nevertheless, Jesus' words must be taken with all seriousness (Heb. 12:25-29).

Bless-ed are **the Poor in Spirit**, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven

- A frequently encountered "divine passive," God bestows by His grace.
- Isaiah often uses "poor" to denote humble people who are acutely aware of their need for grace (Isa. 57:15-17; 61:1-3; 66:2)
- Jesus came for such people (Lk. 4:18-19; cf. Lk. 18:9-14; Gal. 2:20; 6:14)
- We are beggars, defenseless in this world without the protection of God.
- Kingdom citizens are ruled by God as they await the consummation of all things (cf. Col. 1:13).
- The Old Syriac is translated, "Happy it is for the poor in spirit, that theirs is the kingdom of Heaven."

Bless-ed are **those who Mourn**, for they shall be Comforted

- God's people are willing to suffer for their values and thus experience the sorrow that God alone can comfort.
- This also applies to us when we turn from sin (cf. Acts 2:37; Lk. 7:36-38; Rom. 7:24; II Cor. 7:10)
- Additionally, we mourn the condition of those who remain in the world (Lk. 22:62).

- Mourning brings life into clear perspective for those belonging to God (Ecc. 7:2-4).
- The two Great Commandments center our attention on all facets of mourning by addressing God, self, and others as part of our world of concerns (Mk. 12:28-34).

Bless-ed are **the Meek**, for they shall inherit the Earth

- Very dependent on Psalm 37:9, 11, 29 (cf. Isa. 61:7).
- These are not the personally arrogant and aggressive, but are those directed by the Lord's interests and His standard of justice (Jn. 4:34; cf. Hab. 1:7).
- The battle for the earth or land would not be won by Jewish sects.
  - Essene withdrawal from society was not the answer.
  - Political compromise by Sadducees and Herodians would fail.
  - Pharisaic emphasis on outward purity was misplaced.
  - The Zealots strategy of armed resistance was defeated.
  - Only the meek would win.
- The Promised Land was not to be the land men should covet above all other lands (cf. Rom. 4:13; 8:22; Heb. 11:8-10).
- The meek live lives balanced between extremes (Deut. 5:32)
- The Babylonian Talmud associates the idea with those who do not engage in causeless anger (cf. Matt. 5:22 KJV).

Bless-ed are **those who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness**, for they shall be Filled

- Again, the Psalms are at the forefront (Ps. 107:5-6, 9; cf. Ps. 22:26).
- True hunger and thirst are very rare in our culture; they were far from rare in Jesus' day.
- Such extreme spiritual hunger and thirst is to be directed toward God (Ps. 42:1-2; 63:1).
- A continuing search, a relentless drive are suggested (cf. Matt. 6:33; 13:44-46).
- Righteousness is an important focus
  - God's saving acts are at its heart (Mic. 6:3-5; Rom. 1:16-17).
  - Declared as just, given a status—imputed righteousness (Isa. 46:13; 54:10-17).
  - Human response required (Job 29:14-16; Isa. 42:3; Mic. 6:6-8).
  - A companion of peace (Isa. 32:17-18, 20).
  - A concept of relationship (Ps. 15:1-5)
- Another "divine passive," God provides (Ecc. 3:11; 12:13).
- "Righteousness" and "justice" are largely synonymous ideas.
- There is a strong social or community element (Gal. 6:9-10; I Cor. 12; Phil. 3:20; Deut. 27:19; Ps. 35:3).

Bless-ed are **the Merciful**, for they shall Obtain Mercy

- Note Proverbs 14:21 and 17:5.
- The idea is of compassion expressed in both feelings and actions.
- Mercy does not preclude justice, but it is God's much preferred way to act (Prov. 21:13; Hos. 6:6; Matt. 9:13; 12:7; Jn. 3:17; Jas. 2:13).
  - The Prodigal Son is a wonderful illustration of the point (Lk. 15:11-24).
  - Jesus' ministry was characterized by this quality (Matt. 9:36; 14:14; 18:27; Mk. 1:41; 6:34; Lk. 7:13; 10:33)

- Forgiveness of sins is strongly related to this idea (Matt. 6:9-13; Matt. 18:23-35; I Jn. 4:19).
- Another “divine passive,” God alone can provide the mercy we desperately need to receive.
- We are to judge considering the inside of a person not just outward actions (Lk. 10:38-42; Jn. 7:24; Col. 3:12-14; cf. I Sam. 16:7).

Bless-ed are **the Pure in Heart**, for they shall see God

- Note Psalm 24:3-5; 73:1 where the emphasis is on the heart.
- However, over 200 pages of the Mishnah are devoted to outward purity (cf. Matt. 23:25-27).
- The idea involves being unadulterated, complete, well rounded (cf. Matt. 5:48).
- Pure motives—what you see is what you get, transparent, no hidden agendas (cf. Prov. 4:23).
- Such people “get it,” they see God (Jn. 1:1, 14, 18; 14:7-9).

Bless-ed are **the peacemakers**, for they shall be called the sons of God

- Yet another “divine passive,” God must make the call (Jn. 3:1).
- There is a hierarchy to peace.
  - With God (Ps. 51:4)
  - With self (Ps. 51:12; cf. Phil. 4:7)
  - With others (Ps. 51:12-13)
- Peace is not just the absence of negative factors; it includes the presence of a positive relationship (Ps. 133:1; CF. Isa. 11:6).
- In this we must do all we can, but we can only do so much (Rom. 8:7; 12:18; I Cor. 9:19-23; 10:32-33).
- We are to live as sons of God, not sons of the Devil (Matt. 5:43-48; Jn. 8:44).
- In all this, we must remember there remains a sword because many will not receive God (Matt. 10:34-39; cf. Mic. 7:6).

Bless-ed are **those who are Persecuted for Righteousness Sake**, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven

- As with the first Beatitude, so with the last, kingdom citizenship is of paramount importance.
- A consequence of living a life contrary to the values of the world is persecution (Matt. 10:22; Jn. 15:18-21; 17:14; II Tim. 3:12; I Pet. 4:12-16).
- Satan has a particular hatred for God’s people (Rev. 12:17).
- This Beatitude gets reinforcement from two additional verses, Matthew 5:11-22, so we will understand the earthly consequences of kingdom citizenship.
- The heavenly gain now and later much more than compensate for all sufferings (II Cor. 4:17-18; 11:24-29).

The Beatitudes remain a challenge to all the people of God. They speak honestly of persecution, but they also tell the wonderful satisfaction and well being of those who live by Kingdom principles.