

Introduction

Today, I'm going to preach about what are called "**the Beatitudes**" in Matthew 5:1-12. In this text, Jesus uses the formula, "**Blessed are**" nine times. The word "**beatitude**" means "**blessedness**," which explains why we call what He teaches "**the Beatitudes**."

Note two things about them. First, they're treasured. They're one of the most loved and used texts in the Bible. Second, they're also misunderstood. They are in fact one of the most misinterpreted texts in the Bible and as a result, one of the most misapplied. But when correctly interpreted and applied, their message is simple and clear. "**Woe isn't me**," and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

What "Blessed" Means

We start with the word "**blessed**." Many people interpret it to mean "**happy**." Happy are the poor in spirit, happy are those who mourn, and so on. But that isn't a very good translation. It doesn't do justice to the meaning of the word. The Greek word translated "**blessed**" here means something much deeper than happy. The Greeks used it to refer to the kind of blissful existence that their gods lived. It then came to connote the highest possible condition of life. And that's to what Jesus is referring here, the highest possible condition of life on earth – the one that every sane person in history has desired and sought.

What is that condition of life? It's one of pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy. "**Pervasive**" means they permeate every part of our lives. "**Habitual**" means that they routinely do so. Love, peace, and joy, in other words, consistently prevail in all aspects of our lives. It's exceptional, out of the ordinary for us, when they don't.

A blessed Christian and his law school friend were associates in an Akron law firm and hoping to make partner. His friend did but he didn't. It didn't upset him though. He was so happy for his friend in fact that he threw a little party for him to celebrate.

Imagine this if you can. We rejoice not fret when others outshine us. We receive criticism with gratitude not anger. We enjoy simple things not long for luxurious things. We relish aging not abhor it. We anticipate death not dread it. We're contented not disturbed when we don't get our way. We're unmoved by the approval or disapproval of people. And on it goes. Imagine having that kind of life – one of pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy. We're blessed when we do.

The Beatitudes

Now that we know what "**blessed**" means, let's look at the nine beatitudes themselves, each of which identifies a condition of life. There is a critical interpretive issue here that we have to resolve. Are these conditions of life desirable or undesirable ones?

Most Christians believe they're desirable conditions, even meritorious. They're conditions that guarantee salvation. Every sermon I've ever heard on the Beatitudes in fact interpreted them that way – as necessary preconditions of salvation. If we're poor in spirit, mourn, and so on, we're saved. If we aren't poor, don't mourn, and so on we aren't.

A mother told about her son – a strong, competent, career military man – leaving Christianity because of the Beatitudes. He had been taught that they were the ideal - that he had to be poor, mournful, and so on in order to be a Christian. To which he responded to his mother: "**That isn't me. I can never be like that.**"

Notice what he declared, "**I can never be like that.**" Question – Are we really supposed to be like that – poor in spirit, mournful, and so on? Most Christians think so.

But I'm not one of them. The key to interpreting the beatitudes is the audience to whom Jesus was speaking. According to 5:1 and 7:28, it was "**the crowds,**" what we call the "**masses.**" The Pharisees of Jesus' day despised these masses and derisively called them "**the people of the land.**" They did so because they were woeful, that is, poorly off, and observably so. They were the religious, social, financial, and

political nothing's of Jesus' day with whom no self-respecting person, like a Pharisee, would have anything to do.

Well, as Jesus looked over the crowds, He began His Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7) by describing them. That's what the Beatitudes are. They're Jesus describing the woeful people to whom He was about to preach. The nine conditions of life are what He saw and are as follows: (1) the poor in spirit (those who are spiritually bankrupt and deprived); (2) those who mourn (those whose hearts have been broken); (3) the gentle (those who are easily intimidated and shy); (4) those who hunger and thirst after righteousness (those who desperately want the wrongs in their lives righted); (5) the merciful (those who are taken advantage of); (6) the pure in heart (those perfectionists for whom nothing is good enough including themselves); (7) the peacemakers (those who are caught in the middle of things); (8) those who have been persecuted (those whose lives have been ruined because they stood up for what is right); and (9) those who are insulted and persecuted because of Jesus (those who have been cast out because they took up with Jesus). Those conditions describe the people to whom Jesus was about to preach.

And they are, as you can see, undesirable ones. No one wants to be shy, taken advantage of, caught in the middle, persecuted and so on. The Beatitudes are conditions that make us not well off but poorly off instead. Let me flesh out the first of those to illustrate what I mean, **"Blessed are the poor in spirit."**

An evangelist came to my home church when I was a boy for revival services. He preached about the Beatitudes one night and interpreted **"the poor in spirit"** this way. They're those who are humble minded and recognize their need for God. That is a good and necessary quality, he claimed, and only those who have it can be saved, which is true.

But that isn't what the first Beatitude means. The **"poor in spirit"** are those who are spiritually deprived, who have little or no idea what Jesus and His gospel are about. I once counseled a 42 year-old woman, a third generation non-Christian. I mentioned Genesis 2:20 as addressing

an issue in her life. To which she replied, **“What is Genesis 2:20?”** I soon discovered that she didn’t know that the Bible is divided into an Old and New Testament, that it has chapters and verses, and that Genesis is its first book. Imagine the spiritual poverty of one who doesn’t know those most basic things. That’s the kind of condition that **“poor in spirit”** describes. It describes those who are spiritually bankrupt.

That illustrates the essential nature of all nine conditions of life in the Beatitudes. They’re undesirable ones. They’re ones that make people unfortunate or poorly off or as I’m saying it today, woeful.

The Woeful Today

Now, the crowds to whom Jesus preached have their counterparts today don’t they. I’m talking about people who are woeful in one way or the other just as they were. There are two sides to this.

One is what Dallas Willard called **“the silly side,”** the side that the superficialities and misjudgments of our upside down culture create. Based on them, to quote Willard, **“You might think that the most unfortunate people in the world today are the fat, the misshapen, the bald, the ugly, the old and those not relentless engages in romance, sex, and fashionably equipped physical activities.”** It’s true. Our current culture defines blessedness and woe in those terms.

That’s the silly side of woefulness but there is a serious side as well. Many truly are unfortunate: the incurably ill, the bankrupt, the barren, the pregnant at the wrong time, the over-employed, the under-employed, the lonely, the swindled, the divorced, the abused, and on it goes. Sadly, those conditions of life saturate our fallen world.

Those then are the ones to whom the Beatitudes are speaking. They’re those who are, for silly or serious reasons, woeful.

The Woeful Can Be Blessed

When I say **“woeful,”** I mean not only in circumstances, but in point of view as well. That’s why Jesus spoke to the crowds in fact. He knew

what they thought. They had been taught it their whole lives by the Pharisees and their cultural context. They were beyond beatitude.

It's the same today. Some years ago, an Oklahoma teenager committed suicide, leaving behind a note that explained why he did. He had a severe acne problem and could no longer stand the teasing he took from his classmates. He took his life because of what he thought. His peers and our culture's psychotic obsession with looks had convinced him he was beyond beatitude – beyond love, peace, and joy in his life. And he isn't alone. I know it from the counseling and reading I do. Many if not most people believe that. They're beyond beatitude.

But you and I need to know it and shout it from the rooftops. They aren't. No one is beyond beatitude and I mean that literally, "**no one.**" My mother was a classic case in point. She had an 8th grade education, average looks, little money, and as many hardships as anyone I've ever met. Yet, I never once heard her complain and will always remember her for the love, peace, and joy she had. No one, no matter how woeful his or her life, is beyond beatitude. Anyone, including us, can be blessed.

How to Be Blessed

And Jesus tells us how. In Matthew 4:17, He came preaching His central message, "**the kingdom of heaven is at hand.**" "**At hand**" conveys that it's a world from which we can live, and that living from it creates the condition of life He described in Matthew 5:13–7:27, one of pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy.

An analogy helps explain it, the habitat of Polar Bears. They prefer cold weather climate and ice packs that keep them near their food source, seals. That's why when summer comes and polar regions warm up, they travel many miles to remain on the ice. It's there that they thrive.

That illustrates that every kind of life lives from a certain world that is suited to it. It's called to that world by what it is, by its nature. It's there in that world alone that its well-being lies. Cut if off from that world and it will struggle and weaken or perhaps even die. That's true of

bacteria, cabbages, oak trees, pelicans, tigers, and human beings. Every kind of life lives from a certain world that is suited to it.

That world for human beings is a spiritual one. It's the invisible world of the kingdom of heaven at hand. We were made for that world and thrive spiritually, psychologically, and socially when we live from it. Living from it transforms our mental, emotional, volitional, bodily, and social processes. We come to think straight, feel straight, will straight, act straight, and relate straight, the result of which is pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy. The opposite is also true. When we don't live from the world of the kingdom of heaven at hand, we struggle in all respects. The soap opera lives of almost everyone around us illustrate what I mean. They think, feel, act, and relate destructively because they aren't living from the world of the kingdom of heaven at hand.

So, let's live from that world. That's the call of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus tells us how to do that in Matthew 11:11 and Luke 16:16. We **"take it by force."** That language conveys getting rid of life as usual and vigorously engaging the kingdom of heaven at hand. We learn how to direct our minds and bodies to it. We then purposely and persistently do what we've learned. We practice solitude and silence, fast, study, practice lectio divina, pray, worship, fellowship, purposely obey, give thanks, practice God's presence, and interact with the ordinary trials of life, to name a few. We take the kingdom of heaven at hand by force. We vigorously direct our minds and bodies to engaging and interacting with it.

Conclusion

That then is the good news of the Beatitudes. No one, no matter poorly off, is beyond beatitude. Let's live from the kingdom of heaven at hand. We'll be a **"woe isn't me"** not a **"woe is me"** kind of person if we do. Love, peace, and joy will prevail in our lives. How do I know that? It's because Jesus said it, **"Blessed are the woeful."**