

## The Life of Jesus

### Sermon 5: Teaching on the Mountain—“Who does God bless?”

Passages: Isaiah 61:1-3  
Matthew 5:1-12

Just like any other group of people, Christians have their own lingo – words and phrases that are particular to us. Now, there’s nothing wrong with using those words **if** we use them correctly. But the fact is, some words in our Christian vocabulary are seriously misused—and I’m thinking of one word in particular—the word “blessed” or “blessing”.

Now, I admit that I often catch myself saying to someone, “*Be blessed*”. I may sign off a letter or an email with the words, “*God’s blessings*.” But, am I using these words correctly? Am I using them in alignment with the way the Bible uses them?

Let’s pray.

The words “*blessed*” or “*blessing*” are found 477 times in the Bible!

The first time it is used comes very early in the Bible-- in Genesis 1:28-- when God “*blessed*” Adam and Eve. The verse says, “***God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’***”

Another significant passage is Genesis 12:1-3, where we read how God called Abram to embark on a journey to a destination that would be revealed to him as he stepped out in faith. As God called Abram, He also made a promise to him, saying: “***I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.***”

It is obvious from these two passages that “*blessings*” are the opposite of “*curses*”. To be blessed, therefore, has something to do with having **good things** happen to you, as opposed to **bad things**. And to be honest, I guess that’s the essence of what I mean when I say, “Be blessed” or “May God’s

blessing be on you.” Being blessed certainly is a positive thing, and it is something we should want...for us and for others!

But there’s more to it than God simply giving good things to us. From these two passages we see that *blessing* is **primarily about being in relationship** – with others (Genesis 1- God’s blessing was to “multiply” human relationships over the earth) and with God (Genesis 12—Through God’s promises, Abraham knew that he was in relationship with God.)

At the heart of being blessed, therefore, is not so much the idea of getting **good things** as much as being in a **good place...the best place which will help to foster these relationships, even in difficult circumstance!**

Keep this in mind as we watch a YouTube clip from Zepherelli’s film, *Jesus of Nazareth*. (Watch YouTube clip-- Zepherelli’s version)

People often say how wonderful these 8 ‘Beatitudes’ are. If only people would live by them, the world would be a better place. But if we think that Jesus is simply telling people how to behave properly, we will entirely miss the point. These statements of ‘blessing’ are not backhanded ways of saying, ‘*Try hard to live like this.*’ Nor are they a list of 8 ‘*timeless truths*’ about the way the world operates. (If this is what Jesus was doing, then **He was wrong!** Those who mourn aren’t always comforted; the meek don’t always inherit the earth; those who long for justice aren’t always satisfied!) Nor are these 8 statements given by Jesus as a sort of **checklist** on how to find God’s blessing...as if it would be *better* for us to be poor, or suffering injustice, or persecuted!

No, with these 8 pronouncements of blessing, Jesus was simply announcing the fact that **God was renewing His covenant!** Or to put it in simpler terms, **God had not given up on His side of the relationship with His people!**

At this point, it’s important to review what we saw last week. Jesus had just moved north from his hometown of Nazareth, to the town of Capernaum on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He did this because his cousin, John the Baptist, had recently been thrown into prison and Jesus (very aware that the authorities would also consider Him to be a political trouble maker) decided to get further away from the authorities in Jerusalem.

But, of course, it is here, on the northern side of the lake, where Jesus officially begins His ministry. And, as we read last week, it didn’t take long before people from all walks of life came to Him, from as far away as Syria in the north

and Jerusalem in the south. They came because they could see that Jesus' rebel movement was different to all the rest! Instead of violence, Jesus brought the ***Shalom of God*** in word and deed; authenticated by many miracles of healing and exorcism. In other words, people could see that the Kingdom of Heaven was near!

And that brings us to today's text—a text that is often referred to by the name, "The Beatitudes". Why? Because, as Jesus gathers His new disciples together on a hillside outside of Capernaum, He devotes the first **8 opening statements** of His sermon to this enigmatic word, "**Blessed**".

Remember—at its heart, **it's a relational word!** And so, in these 8 statements, Jesus is declaring that, no matter what situation these people are in and no matter how awful their lives have become, God is with them, standing by His ancient promise to do something to change it all.

Or, to put it in grammatical terms, God is alive and well in the present tense! And that's why, out of these 8 beatitudes, it is the first and the last that are present tense declarations.

- Verse 3—"***Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***"
- Verse 10—"***Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***"

Why are they in the present tense? As I understand it, the first and last 'beatitudes' stand like huge brackets around the others. Being in the present tense, they would remind these newly-recruited disciples of *the present reality of situation*-- the fact that Roman occupation had meant that these Jews had lost the right to self-rule; gradually, they were losing their land and their possessions; most significantly, they were losing their dignity and their confidence in God. Nevertheless, in the present, they **are** blessed!

This is why Jesus calls them "***poor in spirit***". This is an incredible insight into their inner state of mind and heart. Deep down in their spirits, these were people who had so little hope for the future. They were desperate!

Having said that, however, Jesus also reminds them that they aren't the type of people who sit idly by while the Romans rule over them. In the second bracket (in verse 10), Jesus notes that they were also being "***persecuted because of righteousness***". In other words, these were men and women who resisted the empire! Perhaps they gathered in secret, while Roman law attempted to

regulate their worship; perhaps they devised ways of worshipping their God in the freedom of the Spirit. They may have even broke Roman laws forbidding them from giving aid to their fellow believers. Perhaps they resisted when they were called to 'dob in' their neighbours. Whatever was happening, these Jews were often caught and punished—***persecuted for righteousness***-- but this only strengthened their resolve! "*Rome may occupy our land*", they would say, "*but they cannot destroy our identity*".

I believe that these were the type of people who came to Jesus on that mountainside. And as I said, that's why Jesus intentionally brackets the entire passage with these 2 present-tense statements. By doing this, He reinforces the essential message that He has been proclaiming from the very beginning: That, even when you are "*poor in spirit*"; even when you are "*persecuted for the sake of righteousness*"... God has not forgotten you! To the contrary, "***The Kingdom of heaven is near!***" It is a present reality, despite your doubts and fears; despite your suffering. It is a present reality, despite the fact that Rome's pressure may be increasing and your personal lives are in torment. "***Yours is the Kingdom of Heaven.***" This is an unshakable truth in the present tense!

At this point, I want to remind you of our second Bible reading for today, taken from **Isaiah 61**.

***The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn,<sup>3</sup> and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour.***

If you remember, this is the passage that Jesus read in the synagogue of Nazareth (recorded for us in Luke 4). He may have been thinking that he could inaugurate His ministry in His own hometown. But, the people of Nazareth couldn't handle the idea that this local boy could be the long-awaited Messiah, and so they rejected Him! That's one of the reasons why He travelled north, to Capernaum, where people would be more open to His message.

But the point I want to make, here, is that *this passage from Isaiah 61 (which He read at Nazareth) must have stood at the very heart of who Jesus believed*

*he was and what He was called to do!* And although He doesn't quote directly from it in today's passage from Matthew 5, it surely looms large in the background! Indeed, many of the concepts that Jesus introduces in these 8 "Beatitudes" find direct parallels in Isaiah 61, echoed in words like "poor", "broken hearted", "captives", "prisoners", "grief", "mourners", "despair" and "righteousness".

In other words, Jesus could see that the old Israel of Isaiah's day (who had been exiled and downtrodden) was now sitting, here, at His feet. They were looking to Him as the Messiah, hoping that He might change Israel's political situation!

But, would He? Would Jesus reverse the status quo and restore God's blessing to His people? Well, it all depends on where you place your eyes!

You see, Jesus is announcing that **they are already blessed**, and by doing so, **He is declaring that the Messianic days foretold by Isaiah have finally begun!** In other words, He sees Himself as the direct fulfilment of Isaiah 61! He is the Messiah who has come to *preach good news to the poor of Israel*. He has come to bind-up the broken-hearted and to comfort those who grieve in Zion! How will He do this? Well, He simply refocuses people's eyes, by saying to them that **God's blessing is not to be found in coup d'états or armed rebellions; it's not even to be found in freedom from Roman oppression!** Rather, **God's blessing comes as you enter into the present reality of His presence in your midst!** This is the Messianic good news, that even though you may be *poor in spirit* and *persecuted because of righteousness*, it doesn't mean that God doesn't care. To the contrary, **He has come to be with you**-- to lift up your eyes to see that the Kingdom of Heaven is, indeed, very near!

Or, to put it another way, the real fact of our blessing is in Jesus! **Jesus is our blessing**...a blessing which not even the Roman soldiers can take away!

Keep that in mind as we look at the more specific blessings pronounced by Jesus in the "sandwich verses"-- verses 4 to 9.

- Verse 4-- To those who were **mourning** over the loss of all that the nation of Israel once was and all that she possessed, Jesus says, *"You will be comforted"*.
- Verse 5-- To those who were **meekly** turning the other cheek when Roman soldiers confiscate your property, Jesus says, *"You will inherit the earth"*.

- Verse 6-- To those who were continuing to suffer abuse at the hands of the Roman invaders...those who were **hungering** for some form of justice, Jesus says, *"It will come-- You will be filled"*.
- Verse 7-- To those who, despite the inner conflict, dared to continue to show **mercy** to their foreign oppressors, Jesus says, *"Keep it up, for one day God will reward you and you will also receive mercy."*
- Verse 8-- To those who were maintaining a **pure heart** in the face of enemy hatred, racism and condescension, Jesus says, *"Instead of seeing the face of your enemies who constantly mistreat you, one day you will see the face of God who will lovingly approve you!"*
- Verse 9-- To those who were longing for **peace** so much that they restrained themselves from joining the ranks of Jewish rebel fighters, Jesus says, *"One day you will hear the voice of God naming you as His own children...for you are reflections of His own peaceful nature."*

These are the 'beatitudes'...the blessings of God! In Jesus Christ, God has renewed His promise to be with His people in each and every circumstance, and one day, to make the world the place that it was always meant to be—a place of limitless blessing in the fullness of God's presence.

The Apostle Paul certainly understood this truth! In Ephesians 1, he writes:

***Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him in love, having predestined us to adoption through Jesus Christ to himself according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace that he bestowed on us in the beloved, in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace...***

Remember this truth whenever you are tempted to think that God doesn't care or that He is far away. Remember that Jesus is here...and **"Be blessed!"**

Let's pray.

*"Lord, thank You for blessing me with Yourself. Open the eyes of my heart to see beyond the physical and material world that I may count all the spiritual blessings that I have in You. Help me to experience You as the highest blessing in the universe! In Jesus' name. Amen!"*