

# Rethinking the Word 'Blessed'

Matthew 5:1-12  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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What does it mean to be blessed? This morning we are going to look closely at that topic through the lens of a familiar passage of scripture from the Gospel of Matthew. You may know this collection of biblical verses by its common title, "**The Beatitudes.**"

The word *beatitude* is the Latin translation of the Greek word *makarios*, which is the word used in Matthew to begin each of the verses from Matthew 5:3-11. This word has been translated into English in different ways. The most common, as we heard from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible, is "blessed." Other biblical translations, especially in the Old Testament wisdom literature, like the Book of Psalms, use "Happy are those" or "How fortunate are those" or even "congratulations to those." A beatitude, however, when used in this particular New Testament biblical context serves as **a pronouncement of God's favor toward and upon those addressed.** Hence, "blessed" actually conveys the meaning, "**God's favor is upon those**" or "**God blesses those who**" or even "**God champions and is on the side of those.**"

Before we take a closer look at the specific list of blessings from Matthew 5, let me briefly set these verses further in their biblical context. Chapters 5-7 in Matthew begin the first of five major sections that focus on the teachings of Jesus. These three full chapters are commonly referred to as the **Sermon on the Mount**, and it begins with these verses that we call the Beatitudes. A modern understanding of biblical scholarship suggests that the biblical author used what comes across as one really long sermon as an opportunity to combine together lots of Jesus' teachings, which were most likely taught at different times and places throughout his ministry. We lose, therefore, their original context from Jesus' actual ministry. But they lose little of their meaning.

So let's look at how this all begins with the blessings that Jesus proclaims. It immediately becomes apparent that this isn't what anyone would typically expect on a Top 10 list of relative blessedness. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (i.e. justice), the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and those who are reviled and persecuted because they are followers of Jesus. Something about this just doesn't sound right. The first one, for example: Blessed are the poor in spirit. Sounds like this could almost mean: Blessed are those who are troubled or even depressed. Perhaps that's how startling these pronouncements should be to us.

Simple observations of the ways of the world, then and now, suggest that it is the rich – financially or spiritually – who are blessed, not the poor; those who are untouched by loss are blessed, not those who mourn and grieve; those who are powerful are blessed, not the meek and humble; those who are treated fairly and respectfully are blessed, not those who are reviled and persecuted for seeking justice. Our culture is so grounded in competition and fear that it seems almost impossible to get anywhere in life if a person is poor in spirit, peaceful, merciful, and meek. The Beatitudes, then, seem to have things backwards! Once again we are faced with the theme known as the 'reversal of fortunes' in the realm of God. What kind of good news is that?

A common misinterpretation of the Beatitudes is that these traits are a call to action, or a list of virtues that are demanded of us as some sort of entrance requirement to be accepted into the household of God. An erroneous way to approach the

Beatitudes, then, is to see them as an ethical code, as instructions for righteous living, or a list of tasks that, once fulfilled, may win God's favor. Yet, note, and this is very important, **Jesus is not asking the crowd (or us) to become poor in spirit, or mourners, or persecuted for righteousness' sake in order to receive God's favor. Instead, what Jesus is doing is offering consolation, encouragement and hope to those who *already* find themselves poor in spirit, or in a state of mourning, or persecuted for doing the right thing.**

Jesus wants us to recognize God's favor is upon us not only when life is good, but also when life is tough, or isn't fair or going well. When life is tough, many of us have a tendency to think God is testing us, or worse, has abandoned us. That's bad theology, at least in my opinion. **Life is tough simply because life is tough. Jesus is saying that God is *already* blessing those of us who are hurting.** And perhaps even more importantly, we are meant to simply receive and recognize God's favor and blessings, rather than attempt to achieve or earn them. For **God's favor comes to us before we try to achieve or earn anything. That's what grace is!** Admittedly, however, grace is still a hard concept for many of us to accept and fully understand.

**We need to see the Beatitudes, then, not as a code of ethics, but as a pastoral gift.** And that is something that many of us especially need at the moment. And the beatitudes are blessings that are spoken both in the present *and* the future tense. For instance, "Blessed *are* those who mourn (present tense), for they *will be* comforted (future tense)." It may also help to remember, as one biblical commentator puts it: [M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, 1995.]

Christianity is not a scheme to reduce stress, lose weight, advance in one's career, or preserve one from illness. Christian faith, instead, is a way of living based on the firm and sure hope that meekness is the way of God, that righteousness and peace will finally prevail, and that God's future will be a time of mercy and not cruelty.

So blessed are those who live this life now, even when such a life is difficult or seems foolish, for they will, in the end, be vindicated by God.

Therefore, let us not confuse being blessed with being successful, or having good luck, or being in a perpetual state of happiness. Instead, know that God's favor is granted to those whom society regards as the ones left behind. **To be blessed is to be filled with a spirit of hope, encouragement and reassurance, even when the outward signs of your life, of our nation's life, indicate otherwise.** As biblical commentator Marcia Riggs summarizes it:

The Beatitudes are spoken to those groups whom God deems worthy, not by virtue of their own achievements or status in society, but because **God chooses to be on the side of the weak, the forgotten, the despised, the justice seekers, the peacemakers, and those persecuted because of their beliefs.**

So as you leave this sanctuary this day, know this: You ARE blessed, God's favor is upon you! It is my hope and prayer that each of us, by God's grace, may be able to recognize and acknowledge God's favor and blessings – especially in the tough times

Amen.