

Following The Way Of The Kingdom: Studies in the Sermon on the Mount

**First Methodist Church of Tulsa
Fall 2025**

**Session 2: A Blessed Life
September 10, 2025**

Matthew 5:3

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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1. Take some time to write down what you think a blessed life looks like. Have you ever thought about why those things are what you consider “blessed?” What is it that causes you to put these things on your blessed list?

2. In what ways are the beatitudes antithetical to your blessed list? Where is there overlap? Why do you think there are contrasts and similarities?

3. If, as Willard suggests, “grace isn’t opposed to effort, but to earning,” how are you managing a mindset of effort over earning? In other words, are you doing the means of grace or spiritual disciplines to try to please God, or to cooperate with him in a way that helps you become the kind of person who naturally lives the way of the kingdom?

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I promise it was completely unintentional, but I realized that as I was writing the lesson for this week, the framework for understanding the Sermon on the Mount follows almost step by step some work Willard had done on what he called the Four Great Questions of Human Life. They are:

- The nature of reality?
- Who is well-off?
 - Blessedness
 - The Good Life
- Who is a "really good" person?
- How to become a "really good" person

Now, we talked about worldview last week which really is a discussion about reality. What is real? Is it the kingdom of God which includes God's way of seeing the world, interpreting events, and acting in response to those events? Or is it the kingdom of the ruler of this world, Satan, whose favorite phrases seem to be "that's just the way it is," and "but we've always done it that way"? Jesus has heralded the call to repent, or change our lives, because the kingdom is here, exerting its authority and will over all of humanity and creation. So we prayed this last week, "Lord, your kingdom is here. Change my life!"

Does anyone want to share about anything God might have done or said in response to that prayer this week?

Well, we're not moving on from that prayer. In fact, we're diving deeper because the beatitudes are going to require some real realignment with God's kingdom for them to make sense. Before we get into that, though, I want us to think about the second great question of human life: Who is blessed? Or what does a blessed life look like or entail in our culture? Let me write those on the white-board. Blessed - makarios. "blessed, fortunate, happy." Who is blessed, fortunate, and happy in this world?
(Ask why those particular things indicate blessedness in 2025 USA.)

Abraham Maslow described a hierarchy of needs in his work beginning with the basics of air, food, water, clothing, shelter, sleep. Then he worked his way up to safety, then belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization. The movement upward indicates that the levels below are taken care of. If you're alone in the woods, like that show Alone on the history channel, and you're able to take care to start a fire, find some water and food, then you feel secure enough in that to turn to your shelter which is a defense against the elements and critters. You know what seems to get a lot of those contestants? The loneliness. I saw all of this because the temptation is to be in one of these levels and look up at the next one and say, "well, that looks blessed to me!" You live in a 1000 sq ft. house, the people in the 2000 sq ft house are blessed. That's the way we've been trained. That's the way we've been disciplined by the world to think. But, the Son of Man said that he had no place to lay his head. Was he blessed?

Well, let's look at what he says about the blessed life. Who wants to read Matthew 5:3-12?

Matt. 5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matt. 5:4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Matt. 5:5 "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Matt. 5:6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Matt. 5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Matt. 5:8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Matt. 5:9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Matt. 5:10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matt. 5:11 “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus begins his sermon on the kingdom of God by telling us who is blessed. When you hear words like, poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst, who are merciful, who are pure in heart, who make peace, those who are persecuted and reviled, how many of those make your list of what happy, blessed, and fortunate?

There are two things I want to note here as we discuss these. One is to remember what I said last week: the goal here isn't to look at this list and say, "I'm going to try and be meek." What we want is that repentance, that constant turning to God, so that we become people who are meek. Let's not get the cart before the horse, here, so to speak. We turn to God, realign our wills with his will, our hearts with his heart, and he makes us people who become these things. "Lord, your kingdom is here, change my life!"

The other thing I want to note is what I've been leading toward as we started talking about what it means to be blessed. The reality of the kingdom is not the reality of the powers and principalities. The powers and principalities don't want you to be meek, they want you to be aggressive and selfish. The powers and principalities don't want you to hunger and thirst for God's way of doing things, they want you to be self-interested. The powers and principalities don't want you to mourn and lament, they want you to pretend that everything is okay so that you never show weakness on the outside so that your brothers and sisters can comfort you by the aid of the Holy Spirit. The powers and principalities don't want you to be merciful because that's weak. The powers and principalities don't want you to be pure in heart, they want you to be duplicitous. The powers and principalities don't want you to make peace, because you can't profit from that.

The powers and principalities don't want you to turn to God in order to become the kind of person that is called blessed in the rule of God's kingdom. They don't want your reality to shift. They want you to keep on benefitting them and the way they're managing the world.

Two more things I want us to discuss before we wrap up. The first is something grammatically that I want to point out about the beatitudes. The blessing in all of these is future oriented. If you mourn, you "shall be" comforted. It's hard, but realize that sometimes there's a deferred blessing that occurs. Except for two of them: the poor in spirit and those who are persecuted for righteousness (doing things God's way) now, in the present tense, have the kingdom of the heavens. Poor in spirit here denotes a kind of life in which inwardly, you're utterly dependent upon God. If you are materially impoverished, you depend on the charity and kindness of others, right? If you're spiritually poor, you're dependent on the charity and kindness of God completely and totally. And if you do things God's way, you might get knocked down by the current regime and by people who are unaware that there is a real reality of the kingdom. In both situations, your consolation is that you are, now in the present, walking in the way of the kingdom of the heavens.

One of the things that's been most helpful to me of late is something my friend J.D. Walt wrote about last month in his Wake Up Call devotional where he talked about the difficulties and hurdles of this life being a test of faith. There have been times where God has shifted my attention recently from the problem or problems I'm facing to him when I say, "Lord, this is a testing of my faith." It's strengthened me because I'm utterly dependent upon him. It reframes the problem from being merely a problem and instead creates a framework for me to increase my desire to trust God more. I encourage you to try it. Take something that is stirring up your soul in a negative way, and tell God, "this is a testing of my faith." Think about what it would look like to respond in a way that deepens your dependence upon him.

Lastly, I want to say something about the how here because I know, in many ways, this seems theoretical rather than practical. We are saved by grace through faith and this is not our own doing, it is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8-9). This is 100% true. At the same time, God doesn't expect us to wait around for him to change us. Willard liked to say, "grace is opposed to earning, not effort." We're not earning grace, but we do things, we make an effort, because God wants our wills aligned with his. That's why spiritual disciplines, or in the Wesleyan way of saying things, the means of grace are so important. Prayer, fasting, searching the Scriptures, serving the poor, the sick, and the

imprisoned. Doing these things aren't earning brownie points with God, they are helping us conform our souls to him. They help us become the kind of people who are blessed. So I want to encourage you to practice them.