



*The
Blessed
Life*

STUDY GUIDE

WEEK ONE – February 6 (That Nobody Wants)



Begin the study by inviting the Holy Spirit to be present. Ask the Holy Spirit, "What do you want to teach me/us in these moments?"

Matthew 5:1-12

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, 2 and he began to teach them, saying:

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

4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (NIV)

During this series, "**The Blessed Life**," we'll be looking at and considering each of the eight Beatitudes. Before we begin, let's take time to consider the Beatitudes as a whole in order to see how they move us toward the blessed life God promises.

Pope John Paul II spoke to a group of teens in March 2000 about the difference between Christianity and modern culture. "Modern culture says, 'Blessed are the proud.' Jesus said, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' Culture says, 'Blessed are the pitiless.' Jesus said, 'Blessed are the merciful.' Culture says, 'Blessed are the devious.' Jesus said, 'Blessed are the pure in heart.' Culture says, 'Blessed are those who fight.' Jesus said, 'Blessed are the peacemakers.' Culture says, 'Blessed are the prosecutors.' Jesus said, 'Blessed are the persecuted.'"

The Pope was right on target. Jesus' teaching still applies in the 21st century. The truth He proclaimed isn't unique because it's ancient. It's special because it possesses divine authority and wisdom. Our need to embrace the radical teaching about this first-century carpenter's reconstructing of our hearts is greater than ever. While the terms may be familiar, the truth is still fantastic.

Pastor and author Erwin McManus once said, "We have become accustomed to watching life go by and if we are not careful we can come to a place where we conclude that we are living life – not realizing that we are simply watching it pass us by. The calling God has for us is to realize that we can live a life more wonderful than we could ever imagine."

The question we must wrestle with is this: “Am I willing to allow God to lift me out of my subpar existence to live a life that can only be lived with His presence and power?” What we need to understand is God’s desire for our lives far exceeds anything beyond our imagination.

The problem is we become far too content with living our lives in a way that is kind of like putting them in cruise control and never really paying much attention to them from that point. The challenge is for us to live life up and beyond the status quo—to step up and step out—to live our faith out boldly—to live life as it’s meant to be.

In these eight Beatitudes, Jesus shares with us the way that leads to a blessed life. While on the surface they may seem simple enough, the question is: do we fully realize what they’re calling us to? The blessed life is something we all want—as long as it’s on our terms. In this study, we’ll be unpacking all Jesus has to say about the blessed life He says can be ours. The question we’re going to have to wrestle with is, “Do we really want it?”

- When you think about a “blessed life,” what comes to mind? What does a blessed life look like to you?
- Do you think the blessed life Jesus speaks of is something we understand?
- Do you think the blessed life Jesus speaks of is something we want?
- What would it mean to you to live the blessed life Jesus is speaking of in the Beatitudes?
- What would need to change in your life?

RESPOND

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it?*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Who do you need to tell about it?*

WEEK TWO – February 13

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit



Begin the study by inviting the Holy Spirit to be present. Ask the Holy Spirit, "What do you want to teach me/us in these moments?"

Matthew 5:3

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (NIV)

Luke 18:9-14

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' 13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' 14 "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (NIV)

Many people read this beatitude as extolling the virtue of being poor, but nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus is talking about the poverty of our own souls—our inability to save or rescue ourselves—as the key to inheriting the Kingdom. When we finally come to understand there's nothing we can possibly do that will cause God to love us more or anything we can do that will cause Him to love us less, we'll be at the place of poverty of spirit. Then we will begin to realize just how great is the gift of grace.

Jesus isn't glorifying material destitution. He's not saying it's awesome to go "without" in this world or we need to wait to get to heaven for things to get better. That's just callous and unhelpful. Besides, if this verse was really only referring to material want or poverty, it could be construed as unloving or unchristian to seek to alleviate the burdens of the poor. So, this verse doesn't sanction or glorify material poverty. Instead, Jesus is simply using a much-recognized, financial reality to uncover a not-so-easily-recognized reality—our SPIRITUAL POVERTY.

Author Eugene Peterson paraphrases it this way in *The Message*: "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope—with less of you there is more of God and his rule." Spiritually speaking, "blessing" doesn't mean getting to "the top of the ladder," but rather getting to "the end of your rope." Jesus is saying you are blessed when you realize you have nothing within you that is commendable to God—because that's when the Kingdom of Heaven is ours.

We have to embrace the poverty of our spirit—our inadequacy—for God to possibly be able to use us. You see, God has a track record of using the poor in spirit in transformational ways—think Paul, David, and Gideon—to name a few. Sadly, when we dismiss our poverty in Spirit, we often fall prey to the same tragedy of the church in Laodicea—thinking we’re awesome, but in reality we’re “pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (Revelation 3:17). This beatitude’s intent is to wean us from relying on ourselves, our savvy, our gifts, our abilities—and learn to fully rely upon God. The Bible is clear: rely on yourself and miss the Kingdom. Rely on God and gain the Kingdom. This isn’t only how we become a Christian—it’s how we grow as a Christian.

While all of this provides wonderful examples from which we can learn, it also, I believe, forces us to look at our own lives and ask ourselves: where are we when it comes to being “poor in spirit?”

- Do you think we really understand the meaning of being “poor in spirit?”
- What does being poor in spirit mean to you?

It has been said this Beatitude is unmistakably fleshed out in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector found in Luke 18:9-14. As we read it, we need to ask ourselves: which of the two do we most identify with? While we really don’t want to admit it, there are times we identify with the Pharisee more than the tax collector. What we need to understand is the default mode of every human being is to seek to prop ourselves up before God as we compare ourselves to others. We seek to display our goodness rather than humbling ourselves before God and acknowledging our neediness. Let’s face it—none of us likes getting in touch with our weaknesses. God, however, wants us to come to that place where we see and get in touch with our brokenness and acknowledge our reliance on Christ and His sacrifice on the cross. We’re told time and again—God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble. The beauty as well as the blessing of this Beatitude is God blesses us by allowing us to experience a desperate need for Him—and in return, as we embrace our neediness, He opens the door for His riches—the Kingdom of Heaven.

- With whom do you identify more: the Pharisee or the tax collector?
- What tends to get in the way of our acknowledging our weaknesses? Our neediness?
- What needs to happen to begin to do so?
- Do you think we fully realize our need for God in our lives?
- Do we live as though we do? What tends to get in the way?
- Are we ready in our journey of faith to seek for there to be less of us and more of God?

RESPOND

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it?*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Who do you need to tell about it?*

WEEK THREE – February 20

Blessed are Those Who Mourn



Begin the study by inviting the Holy Spirit to be present. Ask the Holy Spirit, "What do you want to teach me/us in these moments?"

Matthew 5:4

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." (NIV)

Leviticus 1:3-9

"If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he is to offer a male without defect. He must present it at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting so that it will be acceptable to the Lord. 4 He is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him. 5 He is to slaughter the young bull before the Lord, and then Aaron's sons the priests shall bring the blood and sprinkle it against the altar on all sides at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. 6 He is to skin the burnt offering and cut it into pieces. 7 The sons of Aaron the priest are to put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. 8 Then Aaron's sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, including the head and the fat, on the burning wood that is on the altar. 9 He is to wash the inner parts and the legs with water, and the priest is to burn all of it on the altar. It is a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the Lord." (NIV)

There's no doubt—God has a heart for those who mourn—literally. But when we read this verse in the context of the Beatitudes, right after realizing our poverty of soul, it becomes clear the mourning Jesus is talking about in this verse is the mourning caused by repentance. As we realize the gift of grace, we then begin to grieve our sin—the same way we grieve the loss of a loved one.

Of the nine words for "sorrow" in the Bible, this word "mourn"—"pentheo" in the Greek—is the strongest of all. It means to grieve or lament. It denotes an aching and grieving for the dead or for a severe and painful loss. Jesus is saying God actually blesses us by allowing us to experience deep sorrow over the sins that have made us so needy for God in the first place.

One bona fide mark of a Jesus-follower is they don't excuse, rationalize, trivialize, belittle, or ignore sin. Rather, they own it, grieve over it, confess it, and repent of it. It's a gift of grace to have this perspective on sin, and it prompts us to react and respond to our sin with grief.

I suspect we've all mourned over the sin in which we've been caught because of what it cost us. We find this from King Saul when the prophet Samuel confronts him over his sinful rebellion:

"Then Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned. I violated the Lord's command and your instructions. I was afraid of the people and so I gave in to them. 25 Now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the Lord." (1 Samuel 15:24,25)

At first glance, it appears Saul's response is legitimate—but as we dig deeper, we find his confession of mouth is faster than his contrition of heart. The bottom line is he didn't genuinely grieve over his sin. Saul made excuses and lost God's favor.

Then, there's King David and his response when he was caught in the aftermath of his sin with Bathsheba:

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge."
(Psalm 51:1-4)

David understood his sin and both grieved over it and truly repented and found forgiveness. The lesson we learn here is a broken heart over sin is a prerequisite for genuine confession of sin.

Too often we fail to get specific about the ways we have sinned in our thoughts, our attitudes, language, lust, disobedience, greed, and pride. In this Beatitude, Jesus wants us to understand we miss the point when we mourn more over what we've lost than what we've done. Mourning over anything other than our sin is missing the heart of this Beatitude—completely.

- Do you think we take seriously the importance of being specific about our sin—or do we simply lump them all together in a generic way?
- Do you think we truly mourn over our sins?
- What gets in the way of our doing so?

In Leviticus 1:3-9, we read about the offering for sin so there could be atonement. Stop and think about how you might have felt being the one who laid your hand on the animal being sacrificed and then slaughtering it. Following this, you would then watch the sons of Aaron prepare the offering and place it on the fire. It has been said, "You would certainly get an up-close and personal sense of the dreadful seriousness of your sins. How vividly the cost of your sin would be displayed before you, in all its bloody, gory detail."

Now stop and think about the sacrifice Christ made on our behalf for the forgiveness of our sins. How much more should we experience a great mourning, sorrow, and remorse over our sins that cost Jesus His very life? If we are true followers of Jesus Christ, then we dare not be indifferent, insensitive, or hard-hearted to the incalculable price Christ paid for our sins—His very life!

This Beatitude shows us, once we realize the poverty of our souls, we should also feel grief and remorse for our sins. When we take our grief over sin seriously, God doesn't leave us hanging. When we mourn like that, Jesus Himself comes alongside us to bless, forgive, comfort, and strengthen us.

- Do you think we take our sin seriously?
- Do you think we genuinely hate it and grieve over it—or do we tend to ignore it, trivialize it, and even at times embrace it?
- How seriously do you take your sin?
- What changes need to take place in your life when it comes to your sin?

RESPOND

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it?*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Who do you need to tell about it?*

WEEK FOUR – February 27

Blessed are the Meek



Begin the study by inviting the Holy Spirit to be present. Ask the Holy Spirit, "What do you want to teach me/us in these moments?"

Matthew 5:5

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." (NIV)

Genesis 50:15-21

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" 16 So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 17 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept. 18 His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said. 19 But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. 21 So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (NIV)

Most people think of meekness as weakness, but nothing could be further from the truth. To be meek does not imply timidity, frailty, a lack of conviction, or seeking peace at any cost. It doesn't mean soft or spineless. It doesn't mean Christians must be a doormat that everyone walks all over.

As Jesus speaks of meekness, it's difficult to imagine His followers would've been thrilled with meekness as the criteria for inheriting the earth. It's been written, *"Remember, Matthew's gospel was written first to the Jewish community and their expectation was a Braveheart, William Wallace-esque, a Navy SEAL-type Messiah who would annihilate their Roman oppressors. In their minds, great causes were fought by the strong not the meek. That's why the Beatitudes are hard to embrace—they thought you could not win victories while mourning—and you certainly could never conquer Rome without toughness or power. Truth be told—many of us still don't understand the power of meekness."*

If meekness doesn't mean weak, soft, or spineless, then exactly what does it mean? The Greek word for "meek" means "power under control," "bridled strength," or "power harnessed for a purpose." An illustration would be a wild horse that needs to be broken to be useful. A meek horse isn't a weak horse, but rather has been brought under its master's control. For our purposes, to be meek means to be submissive to the word of God.

The story of Joseph found in Genesis 37-50 is a story that reflects the strength of meekness. After being sold into slavery by his jealous brothers and suffering a humbling reversal in Egypt, Joseph is elevated to the second-most important position in all of Egypt. He's the one responsible to govern in Egypt in order to see it through a severe seven-year famine. When Joseph's brothers came seeking grain, he could have hammered them for the atrocities they committed against him—but instead, he processed all his brother's dealings without toxic bitterness or unhinged revenge in his heart. Joseph's response in Genesis 50:19,20 exhibits meekness. He modeled power under control—and in lieu of seeking revenge, he spoke only of the sovereignty of God and God's greater purposes. Joseph could do all of this because he understood God was in control.

- How do you think our society defines meekness?
- What comes to mind when you think of meekness?

When Jesus says, *"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth,"* He wasn't referring to things like earthly wealth, fame, cars, houses, or the like—all things people deem as essential. Ultimately, the Bible tells us *"The earth is the Lord's—and everything in it"* (Psalm 24:1). "The earth" includes all the good things God made and all the good gifts He offers his children—like beauty, meaning, love, joy, purpose, significance, and salvation. "The earth" represents the goodness and fullness of God—both in this life and the life to come. "Inherit" is an interesting word choice, as well. What do we have to do to inherit something? Not a thing. In fact, the moment we start pursuing an inheritance, something's wrong. Literally, the only thing someone has to do to inherit something is to be rightly related to the person who has something to give away. The only way to inherit the earth is to be rightly related to the One who owns the earth—God Himself!

So according to Matthew 5:5, the best is yet to come for the meek—for those who have self-control—because they understand God is in control. They likewise understand someday they'll assume their inheritance. The call is for us to stop seeking to get and maintain power, but rather to rely on the One who has all the power—Jesus.

- Do you think we understand what it means to truly allow God to be in control?
- Do you think we trust God to be in control of our lives?
- What tends to get in the way of our relinquishing control?
- How might someone practice meekness in their life?
- What would need to happen in your life for you to practice the meekness Jesus speaks of in this Beatitude?

RESPOND

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it?*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Who do you need to tell about it?*

WEEK FIVE – March 6

Blessed are Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness



Begin the study by inviting the Holy Spirit to be present. Ask the Holy Spirit, "What do you want to teach me/us in these moments?"

Matthew 5:6

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." (NIV)

Matthew 19:16-22

Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" 17 "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments." 18 "Which ones?" the man inquired. Jesus replied, "'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, 19 honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'" 20 "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?" 21 Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." 22 When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. (NIV)

Each of us comes to a time in our life when we wrestle with the bigger questions of our existence: Why am I here on the earth? What's the purpose of my life? Am I doing anything to make a difference in this world? What will my legacy be when I'm gone? While each of these is a huge and important question to figure out for ourselves, they become much easier to answer when we come to grips with the biggest question of our existence: How do I know whether or not I really know Jesus Christ?

As a follower of Jesus, we need to understand if we have uncertainty in our hearts and minds regarding our relationship with Jesus, it will ultimately lead to inconsistency and ineffectiveness in our walk with him. Assurance of our salvation is a huge step forward in figuring our life out—because if we're struggling to trust Jesus is in us and for us, chances are we won't live like Jesus is in us and for us. Prolonged uncertainty and uneasiness about our status with Jesus may indicate we really don't know Him. The Holy Spirit constantly calls us to take the next step deeper into faith and assurance. Our call is to submit to the Spirit and follow His leading.

This Beatitude is intended to help us answer the question: How can I know that I know Jesus? One of the ways is we experience a change in our desires. Likewise, what we hunger and thirst for says a great deal about who we are and where we stand with Jesus. What we crave (what we want) leads to our choices (what we do)—which determines the trajectory of our lives (where we are going).

Truth be told we really don't know what it's like to experience real hunger or thirst—so it's quite possible for us to miss the punch and urgency of these words. But Jesus' original audience was all too familiar with being hungry and thirsty. To them, Jesus did not painting a comfortable picture—physically or spiritually.

For us to understand this Beatitude, we need to understand what Jesus meant by righteousness. A later Beatitude tells us we're blessed if we're persecuted for our righteousness. So, in one sense, righteousness is a lifestyle that sets us apart and invites opposition from the world.

In Matthew 5:20, Jesus tells us our righteousness needs to surpass that of the Pharisees in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. While the Pharisees and teachers of the law were flawless in following their rules, they missed the heart of what it means to follow Jesus. So, in another sense, righteousness isn't defined by what we do, but by what God has done for us in Jesus.

In Matthew 6:1, Jesus warns us not to practice our righteousness in order to be seen by other people. Many religious folks in Jesus' day loved the limelight and drew attention to their "good works." They prayed to be heard. They gave to be seen. They dressed up to look holy. So, righteousness in this sense doesn't need to be seen by others—only by God.

In Matthew 6:33, Jesus tells us to seek God's Kingdom and righteousness first at the close of a section of scripture devoted to telling us not to worry about temporary and non-eternal things or the future. So, righteousness in this sense means to aim our lives at God the Father—trusting He'll take care of our future.

In Matthew 19:16-22, we find Jesus' encounter with the Rich Young Ruler—who asks Jesus what he must do to have eternal life. In essence, he wanted to know what he needed to do to be right with God. He acknowledges he has kept the commandments—that he's has lived a religious life. Jesus then gets confrontational with him—telling him to go and sell all he has and give it to the poor. Jesus is not making the point that we have to get rid of everything we own, but rather we need to assess what's taking first priority in our lives.

Jesus is calling each of us to examine our relationship with Him—to determine whether or not we really know Him, whether or not we've given ourselves totally to Him. The truth is: only you know if you really desire God—but a genuine conversion to following Jesus will be marked by a radical shift in your desires.

Questions we need to wrestle with: What do you think about? What takes your time? Where do you prioritize the spending of your money? Our desires are revealing, and one all-consuming desire (good or bad) has the capacity to swallow or shape all the rest.

- Do you think we take seriously the need for us to take inventory of our desires?
- What comes to mind when you hear Jesus talking about hungering and thirsting for righteousness?
- Do you think we fully understand what it means to do so?
- What gets in the way?
- What needs to change?

RESPOND

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it?*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Who do you need to tell about it?*

WEEK SIX – March 13

Blessed are The Merciful



Begin the study by inviting the Holy Spirit to be present. Ask the Holy Spirit, "What do you want to teach me/us in these moments?"

Matthew 5:7

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." (NIV)

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. 23 "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. 26 "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' 27 The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. 28 "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. 29 "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' 30 "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. 32 "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. 35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." (NIV)

As we consider the Beatitudes, we find the first four focus primarily on our relationship with God. As we begin our look at the final four, we'll find there's a shift in the focus to our relationships with other people. This mirrors The Great Commandment of Jesus to LOVE GOD and LOVE PEOPLE (Matthew 22:37-40). It's important for us to remember these aren't given to us as commands, but as realities of the Christian life. They aren't necessarily something we do, but rather they become who we are and how we live as Jesus-followers. In essence, the life we live reflects God working through us.

This involves heart work—the kind that involves putting our nose to the grindstone side of discipleship. So when Jesus says, *"Blessed are the merciful—for they will receive mercy,"* it's the first teaching of Jesus about we're supposed to treat other people—with mercy. Mercy is a beautiful concept—but for many, it never leaves the concept phase. For many of us, it's way easier to be done with people than it is to be merciful to people. It's way easier to check out relationally than to do the heart work that makes relationships work.

Mercy is a character trait of God. It's not something God does for us—it's who God is. God is merciful. The scriptures are full of example after example (500 references) of God's mercy being extended to His people. It's essential and central to our redemption. From the time of the Fall back in Genesis 3, humanity has had no way back to God—except through His mercy and grace.

The big idea of this Beatitude is mercy known should translate into mercy shown. Nothing proves we've received God's mercy and forgiveness more than our own willingness and readiness to share God's mercy and forgiveness with others. Our being merciful to others is simply an outpouring of the mercy of God we've experienced in our own lives.

In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus teaches us a significant lesson concerning mercy.

- When it comes to showing mercy to another, do you think we take into consideration the mercy we've been shown by God?
- What tends to get in the way of our showing mercy?
- How might our relationships change if we made mercy our default?
- What changes do you need to make in order to be more merciful?

Jesus is not saying our mercy is conditional on our showing mercy—that's works-based righteousness. Our showing mercy doesn't earn us salvation—it simply demonstrates it. We also don't forgive others in order to be forgiven by God. We don't do something to be saved because Jesus has already done everything to save us. So Jesus isn't only the source of our mercy—He's also the resource for the mercy we give to others. We are clearly called by God to extend mercy and graciously give others second chances.

RESPOND

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it?*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Who do you need to tell about it?*

WEEK SEVEN – March 20

Blessed are The Pure In Heart



Begin the study by inviting the Holy Spirit to be present. Ask the Holy Spirit, “What do you want to teach me/us in these moments?”

Matthew 5:8

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” (NIV)

Matthew 23:23-28

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices — mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law — justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. 25 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. 27 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.” (NIV)

Purity is highly valued and greatly prized in the Bible. God is holy. Jesus is sinless. The Holy Spirit’s purpose is to reveal, convict, and cleanse us from sin. It’s pretty clear where the Trinity stands on the topic of purity—but in our world, impurity is wreaking havoc—personally, relationally, politically, and technologically. Our culture has unleashed a constant bombardment of impure images and thoughts all day—every day.

It’s been said, “Our culture needs a new vision of purity, and this Beatitude casts the vision of the victory we desperately need over impurity.” The question becomes: “Do we really understand what Jesus is saying when He talks about the pure in heart?”

The Greek work for “pure” is “*katharos*”—which is the root word for “catharsis.” A cathartic experience involves an emotional cleansing, a releasing from pain, heartache, or baggage. In the Bible, this word describes being made free from blemish, spot, or stain—someone who is free from corrupt desires and sins—a river whose course is unimpeded—someone who is free from guilt and shame. “*Katharos*” is a rich word.

The Pharisees would have loved this idea—*“Blessed are the pure in heart”*—for they put a great deal of energy into looking the part, fulfilling purity rituals in order to make sure they could always attend worship. But over time, they went too far by adding extra rules while letting go of the Scripture. While they looked the part externally, it was certainly not the same as being internally pure. They spent time teaching how to keep a Kosher kitchen—with all kinds of complex rules—but it didn’t result in a change of heart. They got all twisted up over cups and dishes, but didn’t think twice about cheating or extortion or theft as long—as their cookware was ceremonially clean. The danger we need to understand is our quest for looking good externally while going through all the right motions can keep us from genuine Christianity. The very essence of hypocrisy is keeping up external appearances while our private spiritual world is in shambles.

In Jesus’ encounter with the Pharisees in Matthew chapter 23, we find Him addressing their hypocrisy. He points out their major concern over all the outward appearances while neglecting their inward conditions. The Pharisees’ approach is tempting because we can measure it—we can keep score—we can compare ourselves to others—and can deceive ourselves into thinking we’re “holy” compared to others. But the Bible is clear—if the heart on the inside, doesn’t change, nothing will change. There can be no “new you” without a “new heart”—and only God can give us a new heart through faith in Jesus.

We’re called to be careful to not simply emphasize outward obedience and moral behavior at the expense of inner renewal and a transformed life. We need to make sure we plant the Gospel in our hearts and not just put it on as a moral code we wear on the outside. Jesus is not talking about cleaning up your act or reforming yourself to become the best version of you. He’s talking about heart change—because purity begins at the very core of your being.

- How easy is it for us to get caught in the trap of worrying about how we look and act on the outside while neglecting what’s going on the inside?
- What do you think causes this?
- Have you ever fallen into this trap?
- Do you think we take Jesus seriously when He calls on us to examine our lives—not only externally, but internally as well?
- Do you think we miss the “blessed” life Jesus speaks of because we don’t?
- What needs to change for this to happen in your life?

Jesus tells us in this Beatitude the pure in heart will see God. The Greek word for “see” is *“optanomai”*—which is the root word for “ophthalmology.” This word is used four times in the New Testament to describe Jesus’ post-resurrection experiences (like 1 Corinthians 15:5-8) and His second coming. So, the seeing we’re promised is not only to be able to see the goodness of God at work in our lives in this life, but the promise of seeing God face-to-face when this life is over. Blessed are the “pure” in heart—for they shall “see” God.

What we find here is, as we trust in Jesus, we have our hearts purified and the eyes of our souls cleansed so we can see God. Nineteenth-century English preacher Charles Spurgeon put it this way: “If the heart is foul, the eye will be dim.” It’s been said there are two reasons we struggle so much with real transformation:

- 1) *We try to self-help our way to transformation. We try to rely too much on our own understanding—we try too much to bring about transformation in our own way.*
- 2) *We seek to see a holy God while embracing an unholy lifestyle. We simply don’t take our sin seriously enough.*

- What are your thoughts concerning these two reasons for our struggle with real transformation in our lives?
- Do you think we see these as barriers—or do we tend to ignore them?
- What steps need to be taken to overcome them that we might find purity of heart?

Humanity has a problem that only one man can fix—the God-man Jesus. Jesus’ death on the cross—when applied by faith to our sin—purifies us from all unrighteousness and enables us to see God and how He works. This isn’t necessarily a feeling, but rather a new way of seeing. The Apostle Paul says it this way: *“The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ—who is the image of God”* (2 Corinthians 4:4). When we’re converted to and by Jesus, our spiritual eyes lose their blindness, and we’re empowered to see the truth of the gospel and the glory of Jesus. The call is for us to begin trusting Jesus—really trusting Jesus—who purifies us and our hearts. And purity of heart cleanses the eyes of our soul so God becomes visible.

RESPOND

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it?*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Who do you need to tell about it?*

WEEK EIGHT – March 27

Blessed are The Peacemakers



Begin the study by inviting the Holy Spirit to be present. Ask the Holy Spirit, "What do you want to teach me/us in these moments?"

Matthew 5:9

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." (NIV)

Romans 3:10-18

As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; 11 there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. 12 All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." 13 "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." 14 "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." 15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood; 16 ruin and misery mark their ways, 17 and the way of peace they do not know." 18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes." (NIV)

Peacemaking is hazardous work. Peacemakers step into high-risk, volatile, inflammatory situations—like war, infighting among family members, sexual abuse incidents, marital conflict, and relational brokenness. It's important to note when you do something—when you engage—when you get involved—when you step up and step into potentially volatile situations—sometimes it goes well—but other times it can be painful. So when we read Jesus' words, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God," it's important to remember what happened to the Son of God.

The Greek word for "peacemaker" is "eirene-poieo." It's a word that means making peace and not war. A related Hebrew word is "shalom." In the Bible, peace is really a broad term related to health, prosperity, harmony, and wholeness. It's not a tranquil, meditative state of mind—but rather a way of living. The Apostle Paul wrote extensively about peace—usually from a jail cell—which is a reminder: peace is not the absence of conflict or hardship, but rather the presence of God in the midst of the conflict or hardship. Paul came to realize he only needed to have Jesus to have peace—meaning peace is not contingent on anything except the presence of Jesus. This thinking is counter-cultural—that our peace, our state of mind and being, is not dependent on our circumstances.

It's one thing to experience the peace of God personally—it's another thing to become a peacemaker culturally. The title itself reminds us peace must be "made"—it never happens by chance. Peacemakers intentionally bring combatants to the table and give them a reason to put down their weapons. Their goal is to make peace happen.

Notice Jesus doesn't bless those who have a peaceful disposition (as nice as that might be). He doesn't say, "Blessed are the peaceful." The focus is not on personality, but on the action of the peacemaker—it's connected to the action of making peace. There's a huge difference between minding your own business and being a peacemaker. To the peacemaker, dealing with conflict is their business. It's not passive, but rather the peacemaker leans into the situation—confronting it head on—and in turn is blessed by God.

- Do you think we understand the full ramifications of what Jesus means when He speaks of peacemakers?

The fundamental reason there's a need for peacemakers in the world is because there's a civil war raging in the heart of man. It's a war that's been raging in the human heart ever since Genesis chapter 3. That civil war inhibits peace in the world. In other words, if peace doesn't exist in the hearts of people, it will never permeate the culture in which we live. Paul makes this clear in our scripture passage from Romans 3:10-18 when he writes, *"There is no one who seeks God." "All have turned away." "There is no one who does good." "The way of peace they do not know." "There is no fear of God before their eyes."*

- What are your feelings concerning what Paul says here?
- *"There is no one who seeks God?"* Do you think we truly see the importance of seeking God?
- *"All have turned away."* What causes us to turn away?
- *"The way of peace they do not know."* What tends to get in the way of our knowing peace?
- *"There is no fear of God before their eyes."* Do you think we really fear God?
- How might we change all of these?

We need to understand if we don't have God's peace within us we can't bring God's peace to others. So, we have to ask ourselves: Are we at peace with God? We can't be peacemakers until we are.

As followers of Jesus, we're called to go into this chaotic, strife-filled, war-torn world as peacemakers. We're called to reconcile, intervene, listen, umpire, resolve, and mediate. We're called to do what we can to stop the bloodshed and end the violence by bringing God's "shalom"—His gracious peace—into the world. We begin in our homes and then fan out into the world.

RESPOND

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it?*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Who do you need to tell about it?*

WEEK NINE – April 3

Blessed are Those Who are Persecuted Because of Righteousness



Begin the study by inviting the Holy Spirit to be present. Ask the Holy Spirit, “What do you want to teach me/us in these moments?”

Matthew 5:10-12

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (NIV)

John 15:18-20

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. 19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. 20 Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.” (NIV)

It might be easy to assume those who embrace Jesus’ vision for the blessed life will be accepted, applauded, and even celebrated in the world today—but that’s rarely the case. For every Mother Teresa and Billy Graham who are celebrated, thousands of others are chastised. This last Beatitude of Jesus prophetically reminds us the end game for living out the Beatitudes is not a parade thrown on our behalf, but rather a persecution for your righteous living.

The word “persecute” means to pursue an enemy. It means to chase, harass, and pressure. Before he was known as the Apostle Paul, the Pharisee Saul took great delight in persecuting Christians. He hunted them down, dragged them out of their houses, harassed, and eventually murdered many for their faith in Jesus. So, persecution can be so much more than being attacked, harangued, or blocked on Facebook—it can denote a violent, physical attack or a personal attack with words in the form of slander, insults, hatred, or ostracism.

Jesus tells us the cause of persecution is righteousness. It’s been said, *“for the record, there are no blessings for people who say they follow Jesus, but act like jerks, knuckleheads or over-zealous Pharisees. So, make sure you don’t pick a fight looking for persecution because righteous living will draw enough attention on its own.”*

Jesus also tells us the blessing in store for those who are persecuted for righteousness is “the Kingdom of Heaven”—that they’ll be rewarded in the reign and realm of Jesus the King. What we find is this is the perfect bookend to the first Beatitude, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit—for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”* This means the Kingdom of Heaven is our greatest reward and blessing.

This is the only one of the eight Beatitudes that comes with commentary and explanation (Matthew 5:11,12) as we find Jesus promising God will give us joy and an ultimate reward for faithfulness and continued righteousness.

Paul tells his young apprentice Timothy, *"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life will be persecuted"* (2 Timothy 3:12). This is important for us to grasp if we're followers of Jesus. We need to understand: as we live our lives the way Jesus calls us to, we'll find persecution will often follow.

Jesus, in our scripture passage found in John 15:18-20, tells His disciples—and us as well—persecution is to be expected. So, it should not come as a surprise when an unbelieving spouse derides our faith, a university professor or school teacher demeans our passion for Jesus, a social media platform labels our post as "hate speech," or a government official throws us in prison. While this may not be our experience here in this country, in many countries in the world, this is a very real experience. We need to hear the words of Jesus as He tells us, *"Take heart for great will be your reward in heaven."*

The call is for us to be careful we don't fall into the trap of seeking to be popular or well-liked by others at the expense of our relationship with Jesus. We all want to be liked—but when it compromises our walk with the Lord, we're on the wrong path. As Jesus-followers, we're called to be different from the world—not like it!

- How often do you think we fall into the trap of being more *like* the world than being *different*?
- What causes this—and how might we change it?

It's been written: *"Take note on what the Beatitudes really say about blessing—they are counterintuitive to what we know. And please don't allow a focus on the prosperity gospel to creep in and take over your life. The Bible says that knowing God makes us rich in every way and that not knowing God makes us poor—in spite of wealth. The Beatitudes remind us that who Jesus is and what he has offered us through his death and resurrection is the greatest blessing of all."*

This blessed life that no one really wants is actually the best life of all. It embraces both protection and persecution—success and suffering—getting invited and getting insulted—bigger and smaller—health and pain—more and less—now and later. Rather than material blessing, this is a reminder the blessed life is an eternal life that makes us rich in the most important ways.

- Do you think that our understanding of the blessed life matches what Jesus calls the blessed life?
- In what ways does the world's definition of blessed differ from Jesus?
- Do you think we fall into the trap of believing that, when we give our lives to Jesus, our lives will be blessed and we won't experience difficulties or even persecution?
- What needs to happen in your life in order for you to experience the blessed life?

RESPOND

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it?*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Who do you need to tell about it?*