

Matthew Chapters 5:3-12 – Beatitudes

Context:

The audience is His 12, other disciples, and indirectly, the crowds. This was at the height of Jesus' Galilean ministry (4:23-25).

The Name:

The name “Beatitudes” comes from the Latin Vulgate for the word blessed, happy, rich – beati. This is not the be-attitudes, although that is very clever. The noun “beātītūdō” was coined by Marcus Cicero (106-43 BC) to describe a state of blessedness and was later incorporated within the chapter headings written for Matthew 5 in various printed versions of the Latin Vulgate.

Blessed:

μακάριος Makarios – translated *blessed*. This is a difficult word to research and define. It is used 55 times in the Greek Scriptures. It is used another 24 times in the LXX. The meaning of this word is “pertaining to being happy, with the implication of enjoying favorable circumstances.”

μακάριος is a poetic word. It is a subsidiary form of μάκαρ, which referred predominantly in ancient Greek to the gods (οἱ μάκαρες == the gods). It denotes the transcendent happiness of a life beyond care, labor, and death. μάκαρ is then used of men to denote the state of god-like blessedness hereafter in the isles of the blessed.

In the New Testament, the word is likened to “*chiro*,” joy, happy, rejoice. The difference is significant. This word is not a present happiness or present possession that makes one happy, rather this is a divine decree. If God says you are “μακάριος makarios,” then the recipient of the blessing must look past the distraction and see reality.

Romans 4:6-9; Titus 2:13; James 1:12; 1 Peter 3:14, 4:14

Understanding the Beatitudes:

For most preachers and theologians, the writing of this blessing is the key to happiness. If you want to be happy, then you must meet the character standards given in the Beatitudes. However, this ignores the sentence structure and syntax of this passage.

First, each phrase begins with an axiom – an emphatic truth:

“μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ”	“blessed the poor”
“μακάριοι οἱ πενθοῦντες”	“blessed the mourning ones”
“μακάριοι οἱ πραεῖς”	“blessed the gentle”
“μακάριοι οἱ πεινῶντες καὶ διψῶντες”	“blessed the hungry ones and thirsting ones”
“μακάριοι οἱ ἐλεήμονες”	“blessed the merciful”
“μακάριοι οἱ καθαροὶ”	“blessed the pure”
“μακάριοι οἱ εἰρηνοποιοί”	“blessed the peacemakers”
“μακάριοι οἱ δεδιωγμένοι”	“blessed the persecuted ones”

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Observations:

1. There is no verb; the *are(s)* are supplied in English, but this indicates an axiom, a known truth that does not need to be explained or a truth that cannot be rescinded.
2. The persons addressed are marked by an articular adjective, or an articular participle (adjective). This is not what they do, but who they are.
3. These characteristics are not ideal in the system of the world. In the eyes of the world, these people are weak and vulnerable. But, to God, they are valued.
4. The context is key. Jesus is speaking to His disciples; they have declared that they believe in Him as Messiah (except one), and the other learners are taking in the information expecting that judgment and the inauguration of the Kingdom of God are imminent.

The second half of each phrase begins with a conjunction. That conjunction is “ὅτι *hoti*.” The word means that or because. Blessed are the poor in spirit because theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The reason they are happy is not that they’re poor in spirit but because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Many times, the beatitudes are taught as cause and effect. If you are poor in spirit, then you are blessed in that you will inherit the kingdom of heaven. The poor in spirit is the cause of the “*markios*” and the inheritance. In fact, the opposite is true.

The Jewish disciples of Jesus who experience difficulty, persecution, and self-sacrifice, the ones who reject the world to seek after God and endure hardship have a declaration from God that they are blessed because of future promises.

In future books and letters, we discover that this applies to us as well, we who rely upon the future hope and promises of God to get us through the difficulty of life and the cost of self-sacrifice (Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18). We see a similarity in Paul’s words of encouragement and how God desires us all to come into conformity with the mind of Christ, regardless of the economy (law or grace).

Rabbinic Blessing:

Jesus is a rabbi; He is teaching His students. But what is He teaching them? Is He teaching a new thing, a reformed view of God’s Law? In the Septuagint, the Hebrew word that is most often translated into the Greek “*makarios*” is “*āšrê*.”

Psalm 1:1, 2:11-12, 40:4, 41:1-2, 106:1-3, 119:1-2; Isaiah 30:18, 56:1-2

As a Rabbi, Jesus is encouraging them because those who seek after the Messiah and after the kingdom of God and live rightly in Israel are being and will be persecuted, hated, chastised, reviled, and hated.

Jesus is telling them that for those who are in distress now, it is because of righteousness and because they believe in Jesus.

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Blessed are the poor in spirit:

Literally translated, this is “blessed the poor in the spirit.” In Luke 6:20, the phrase “in spirit” is not there. There are many times that the poor (physically) are to be taken care of and supplied with physical needs. Interestingly, Jesus does not relate to the poor physically but in their spiritual reality in both statements. It is because of this observation that we agree that Luke should be understood as a spiritual poorness as well.

What does it mean to be spiritually poor? Most relate spiritual poorness to humility.

The word *poor* is “πτωχός ptōchos.” This word means complete poverty, reduced to begging, no possible way to get out of poverty and you need help. Is this humbling? I believe it is. So, the typical understanding of poor in spirit as being humble is generally acceptable.

But the word *poor* is never used in a good sense. I believe humble is one sense of the word, but it is greater than that. It’s complete, abject, spiritual destitution. I would not say this is a positive but a reality of the typical Jew who was there with Jesus. They have no understanding because there is no proper grasp of the Hebrew Scriptures; hope is lost. We can be humble, but I am not sure we have experienced this type of spiritual need.

Why are these disciples marked as blessed despite their spiritual wantonness? Because theirs is the kingdom of heaven. *Is* is in the present tense, but we know that the kingdom of heaven is not yet here. Back then, it was close, but the kingdom of heaven is about the millennial reign. This is, then, to be understood as a possession to be realized later (Ephesians 2:6), a reality with a future understanding.

Notice that in verse 10, the same benefit is mentioned. This is the bookend, a pericope. The structure changes in verse 11, and the repetition indicates that this is the foundation for their future hope.

Blessed are those who mourn:

Why do they mourn? This word denotes the sorrow expressed in tears, lamentations, and rites, mourning for the dead, which includes a sorrow of the greatest degree.

This is not mourning out of piety, but a description of those who are distressed. Perhaps they are oppressed; perhaps they have experienced great loss.

Notice that comfort is also a future benefit and awaits them in the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the gentle:

“πραῦς praus” – awareness of one’s lack of self-importance. This is a direct quality of Jesus in His humanity (Matthew 11:28-30). In Hebrew, this word is “ānāw” and is attributed to Moses (Numbers 12:3). Having the characteristic of meekness, gentleness, or humility is also understood as one being afflicted. This meekness can be seen as a self-imposed trait or a result of oppression.

This understanding of “πραῦς praus” with God’s provision is regularly seen in the Hebrew Scripture, but two passages stick out (Psalm 22:25-26, 37:10-11).

What does the text say is the benefit in Matthew? For they shall inherit the earth. The word is “gē,” which to Jews was indicative of the land of Israel, not the whole earth. Their desire was for Israel.