

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

Beloved of the Lord, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. But what does that mean for us? What does the kingdom of God look like in our lives? After Jesus began proclaiming the kingdom, the crowds gathered around. He went up the mountain and began to teach. What follows are powerful, fascinating, strange words. They are among the most well-known and loved in Christendom, yet some strange meanings have been attached to them. I've often heard people assert that the Beatitudes are the "attitudes" Christians should take to live a life of blessing. Yet this is a complete reversal of what Jesus is teaching. In truth, the Beatitudes are beautiful gospel proclamations that serve as the doorway to the kingdom of God.

The Beatitudes conceal the entrance of the Kingdom for those who are not of the kingdom, but they transport those who hear and believe into the Kingdom itself. As they walk through each beatitude, they are drawn nearer to God. Jesus teaches, "blessed are they." To be blessed is more than being happy, joyful, or thankful. It means to be saved and redeemed. It includes a present reality and a future promise. Those who do not believe in Jesus only hear Him talking nonsense, but those to whom Jesus has called are stirred by His words. They wonder, question, and hope the "they" includes "me."

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." But who are the poor in spirit? They are those who find themselves in great spiritual need. This is not a virtue or an attitude of humility but a state of want, of lack, of being without resource. It is the reality that Luther describes when he says, "We are but beggars before God." Yet, the one who sent His Son to reconcile the world to Himself turns our deprived state into a blessing; one that embraces all humanity, excluding no one by necessity! And this is the nature of the rest of the beatitudes. They are open to all who simply hear and believe.

To such is given the kingdom of heaven. Through no spiritual ability or strength of their own, the cosmic powers come to serve their every need. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?" Indeed, through Jesus, He gives us the most needful thing of all: the forgiveness of sins and new life. These are present possessions of those who trust in Jesus. We have been made His brothers and sisters through our baptism. What He has, He gives to you: His righteousness as your own royal dress, His body and blood for your nourishment, His Spirit as your pledge and guarantee of salvation, His inheritance of the kingdom as your own fellowship with the redeemed. This blessing is for all who have already begun to be shaped by Jesus' teaching, "Repent, for the reign of heaven stands near!"

Jesus continues, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." For those who have become aware of their spiritual lack before God, it creates a kind of mourning. This characterizes the lives of Jesus' disciples until the Day of Final Comfort. It acknowledges the reality of sin and evil, present not only in the one who mourns but also in the Church and the world around them. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "in this tent we groan, longing for our heavenly dwelling. We know that while we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith and not by sight." To the Philippians, he writes, "I desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." Though Jesus' presence among us ever blesses us, this fallen, sin-filled world produces mourning and longing for eternal life.

Jesus promises we will be comforted. When the fullness of God comes on the Last Day, sin and evil will be put away forever. The goodness of God will embrace and protect all who believe. Yet so certain and strong is this promised final comfort that it flows back into this flawed existence. As Jesus' disciples, we live in light of what is to come. For now, we live under the dominion of Satan and death. We watch the wicked prosper. Yet we wait for the Lord to act. In Jesus, God has plundered hell and the dominion of Satan, and these blessings come and begin removing the power and oppression of Satan in our lives even now.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Like the poor, those who are meek can’t help being otherwise. Meekness is not a character trait but an inability. Someone who is meek needs deliverance. They cannot save themselves—the oppressive power of Satan, the weight of sin, and the inevitability of death bind them. Yet Jesus promises they will inherit the new creation. Without sin, without Satan, without death. There will be a renewal of all things, and those who have suffered at the hands of wickedness will receive the blessings of God’s great reversal on that day. Yet, the light of that future horizon is already shining! The meek are already saved; their bonds are already broken! We are freed to turn from sin and repent. We are blessed! And this foretaste only serves to whet their appetite.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” When we learn our true spiritual condition and long for God’s final act of salvation, we cry out with the prophets, apostles, and martyrs, “How long, O Lord?” On the Last Day, we shall be satisfied when the everlasting feast is spread out before us on God’s holy mountain. But even now, we are satisfied with a righteousness that is not our own, the righteousness of Christ fed to us in His own body and blood.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” The disciples of Jesus are merciful by virtue of their encounter with mercy incarnate. The act of the Master’s forgiveness has within itself the power to turn His servant into someone who also shows mercy, forgiving the debt owed by a fellow servant. Jesus empowers his disciples to be merciful. We are not perfect, but mercy overflows where it has been graciously poured. Luther says, “The only pupils this verse finds are those who already cling to Christ and believe in Him. They know of no holiness of their own. On the basis of the preceding items, they are poor, miserable, meek, really hungry and thirsty; they are inclined not to despise anyone, but to assume and sympathize with the need of everyone else.” This describes all Jesus’ disciples.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” When mercy flows through us, we are placed into a right relationship with God. Someone pure in heart looks to God alone for their salvation, only worships and acknowledges Him, and seeks Him alone for their blessing. He blesses in the present and on the Last Day those to whom God has thus revealed himself. The pure in heart are those who believe that the God of Israel can be found in Jesus. They are pure because Jesus has called them, and by virtue of that call have been made holy. The realities of the reign of heaven in Jesus are being revealed to them, and though they do not understand everything, they have begun to repent and believe. They have been given pure hearts.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” True peace only comes through the proclamation of the Good News. As Isaiah proclaims, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’” Indeed, the gracious reign of God is found in His Son, Jesus Christ. All who share this peace, whenever and wherever they are, are made to be sons through Him.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Jesus assures us that when we proclaim His good news, persecution will come, and the world will reject us. Even so, Jesus works for our salvation and blesses us. When we hold steadfast and endure, we will receive a reward to be revealed on the Last Day.

When we receive these Beatitudes in faith, we truly are and have what they declare and promise. Our unity with Jesus begins to manifest His life in our lives. It was true for the disciples on that mountain, and it is true for the disciples of Jesus today. Indeed, the Beatitudes contain within them the power to make a listener or reader into a disciple of Jesus and a member of His Church. When we find ourselves feeling the pull or despair of sin, Satan, and death, we can return again and again to this place on the mount, to the door of the Kingdom, and remember that we are blessed. Amen.