

THE BEATITUDES

1. In this and in the following talk, we will work through the remaining parts of the Sermon on the Mount, that we have not so far discussed in this curriculum, as a representative sample of what Jesus taught.

- a. The Sermon on the Mount starts with the Beatitudes.

¹Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ²and he began to teach them.

He said:

*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 children 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.

Matthew 5

- b. Jesus starts His sermon by working through a list of people who are doing well in life, who are blessed. *Makarios*, is the word that is translated “blessed” here. In fact, *1 Timothy 1:11*, uses that same word, *makarios*, to describe God Himself...*according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God*. So, *supremely fortunate*, or maybe something like *profoundly well off*, might approach the idea of the type of state these people are in.
 - c. Now, if most of us were going to make a list of all the people who are profoundly blessed, you might include celebrities, athletes, people with good teeth, clever people, and people with good marriages and pleasant children. The healthy, wealthy and wise, basically.

- d. But not for Jesus. Amazingly, none of those types of people are this list of the Divinely favored ones. Who's on His list? People in just the opposite types of situations. The poor, the hungry, those who mourn.
- e. The physical desperation and emotional pain of these people's immediate circumstances is even more clear when we read the parallel passage, in *Luke 6*.

Looking at his disciples, he said:

*"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.*

²¹ *Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.*

*Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.*

²² *Blessed are you when people hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you
and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.*

²³ *"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.*

By the way, did you notice how that passage started? *Looking at his disciples, he said.* He is talking to His followers. By and large, they are down and outers. Not so gifted. Powerless and politically oppressed.

And then, Jesus teaches the same thing, from the opposite angle.

²⁴ *"But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.*

²⁵ *Woe to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.*

*Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.*

²⁶ *Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you,
for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.*

- 2. Now, how on Earth are we to make sense of all of this? Well, unfortunately, the usual way of doing so is incorrect. In fact, we tend to do a double butchery to the Beatitudes.
 - a. The first butchery is, because we are quite sure that Jesus cannot actually mean what He is saying here, we turn being poor, being hungry, mourning and the rest of these miserable conditions into good things. These are spiritually hungry people, or people who are mournful in regards to their sinful state, and that type of thing, is how we spin them.
 - i. But look at that passage in Luke.

1. The Greek word used for poor there means “dirt poor”. Completely destitute. It describes the kind of person who would likely need to beg for subsistence.
 2. The hungry there are quite literally, people who do not have enough food to eat, on an ongoing basis.
 3. The Greek word for mourn in *Luke 6* is the strongest word for mourning in the Greek language. For example, it is the word used for grieving a deceased loved one.
 - a. In the Beatitudes, Jesus was talking about the brokenhearted.
 4. Matthew’s *poor in spirit* are, quite literally, the spiritually impoverished. The spiritually oppressed, disillusioned, the lost.
 - ii. So, while some of the beatitudes do refer to desirable states, such as being a *peacemaker* or being *merciful*, many of them simply do not. Instead, they refer to states of existence which are not in any way desirable or virtuous in and of themselves.
 - iii. As Dallas Willard put it, blessed are “the flunk-outs, the drug-heads, the HIV positive and herpes ridden, the brain damaged, the homeless, the lonely, the incompetent, the stupid.”
- b. This brings us to the second, and related, butchery that we tend to do to the Beatitudes. We turn them into commands. We treat each beatitude as it were a different condition that must be fulfilled in order for someone to be blessed.
- i. The problem there, for starters, is that this would make being blessed works-based, instead of grace-based, wouldn’t it?
 - ii. And also, such an interpretation simply makes no actual sense of these sayings:
 1. “Blessed are those who mourn. Well, I guess I better get all worked up and start really mourning hard then!”
 - a. Was that Jesus’s message? “Hey everyone, don’t eat anything. And definitely don’t laugh. In fact, weeping 24/7 is the Kingdom way.”
 - b. Of course that was not His message. Being destitute or brokenhearted, in and of themselves, are not good. Deep poverty is a terrible, miserable, nasty thing. Something to be avoided, if possible.
 - c. And anyway, do you see any “ifs” in those beatitudes? Nope. Because the structure of the language of these beatitudes is not a structure of conditions, or of commands.
- c. These are not commands. Instead, Jesus is issuing declarations. The beatitudes are statements of the way things are. *Blessed are*... and so on. And He had to let people know the way things now were, because things had changed, and not everyone was aware of that fact.
- i. The **beatitudes** were Jesus’s explanations of what it meant now that the Kingdom had finally arrived on the scene in human history.

- ii. And what did His Beatitudes teach that the arrival of the Kingdom meant? It meant that a great power had been let loose in the world. A power which was, slowly but surely, changing everything, from the inside, out.
 - iii. In the beatitudes, Jesus sketched out how this seismic shift in human history was starting small, but would rapidly grow and swell, eventually affecting every person on the planet.
 - 1. And when it came a given person's way, this great upheaval would fundamentally change things about their own individual life. In what way? That depended. What the arrival of the Kingdom meant in someone's life would depend on the kind of person it was encountering, on what kind of life they were living.
 - iv. The Beatitudes indicate that this monumental shift had already begun, but it had not yet concluded its work. Which is why, if you look carefully, you will notice that two types of things are mixed together in those beatitudes. Things that have already happened, and things that have yet to occur. The "already," and the "not yet".
- 3. Let's start by discussing the "already's" of the Beatitudes.
 - a. What had the arrival of the Kingdom in human history already changed? First of all, Jesus points out, for deprived folks, who were not blessed or in any way well off previously, the arrival of the Kingdom meant that they are were now, suddenly, in a great situation. A tremendous reversal of their fortunes had occurred.
 - i. Jesus says, "do you think that worldly losers and rejects are unimportant, or that they don't have anything? Think again, folks. Now, they are fortunate. Important."
 - b. But why? In what way had the destitute now become blessed?
 - i. "Blessed are the poor because they are going to get a million dollars in their bank accounts." Nope.
 - 1. Instead, Jesus's message to the poor was that even if they never got a million dollars, they were still in wonderful shape. Because He was giving them something worth much more than a million dollars, a spot in His Kingdom.
 - ii. *Blessed are the poor, because theirs is the Kingdom.*"
 - 1. The text does not say, blessed are the poor for *theirs will be* the Kingdom of Heaven, one day when they die. *Theirs is* the Kingdom. It had come to them. For them. In fact, they are already in possession of it. The long-awaited Kingdom of God was, in their following of Jesus, the reality that they had actually already entered into.
 - iii. The Kingdom had arrived and anyone, anyone, poor or rich, could walk right in. Doesn't matter your past failings, your ethnicity, your current station in life, or any of the rest of it. Which implied the radical fact that now, no human condition, no matter how desperate, excluded the possibility of blessedness. No one was beyond the reach of God's immediate care and

deliverance. *“Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Romans 10:13).*

- c. And who do you think would be particularly excited about such an offer? The destitute and desperate. Let’s get real: many of the people following Jesus around were disasters. They smelled bad, they couldn’t talk right, they were broken and confused, social outcasts, their theology stunk, and a lot of them were just steeped in sin. Some of them were up to really bad things. You took a wide berth as you walked by them in the street. But Jesus didn’t. He walked up to them, touched them, listened to them. Ate with them. They liked Jesus.
 - i. In the gospels we see it is the marginalized and the withouts who are struggling through the crowds, crawling along on all fours and reaching out and touching the hem of His garment. Hollering out insistently from the roadsides to be healed. You couldn’t shut them up. “HELP! JESUS! HELP ME!” Ripping off roofs to get to Him.
 - ii. *From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and violent people have been raiding it. Matthew 11:12.* These people were just beating a path into the Kingdom, violently. *The good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing their way into the kingdom, Luke puts it (16:16).*
 - iii. Largely, these people came to Jesus not out of spiritual interest but because of the physical desperation of their immediate circumstances. And Jesus did meet them in their immediate physical need. With physical healing, for instance. But He always used that physical need as an opportunity to discuss and offer what they needed. He challenged them to have faith, to renounce sin, and to believe in Him.
 - 1. *John 10:38 Even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.”*
 - 2. Jesus told them that more than healing, He came to give them life. Beyond mere physical health, an indestructible and unending spiritual health and vitality.
- d. For the destitute who would accept it, their taking up a spot in God’s Kingdom meant that they now had immediate access to and help from the most powerful and influential person imaginable...talk about an exciting opportunity! And they had access to the possibility of the kind of interior life that results from of being in touch with God. Forgiveness, freedom from sin, the abundant life, the wanters changing, being transformed by the renewing of the mind, peace, hope, and the rest of it.
 - i. And let’s not scoff at that offer of a renewed interior life, as if it’s not a real solution to real problems. On the contrary, it is the only real solution to the problems of life. Much more than a million dollars or physical healing is.
 - 1. You know, Jesus could have given all the poor folks in the world millions of dollars, no problem, easy as snapping His fingers. But would that have solved their real problems, their inside problem?

2. After all, you could have everything going for you, all the money and good health and success and family life and what not, and be miserable on the inside. Plenty of people like that. Just read People magazine.
 3. Or you could be on the bottom rungs of society but have the vibrant life of Christ bubbling up from inside of you.
 4. Which scenario would the rational person choose?
- ii. The “outside” types problems that we face, financial, health or otherwise, while deeply challenging at times, are really not our real issue. As John Milton put it “The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.” Jesus was getting past the outside, the superficial, addressing the deepest and most fundamental human problems: insecurity, frustrated desire, boredom, and loneliness. Want to be rid of those? Only one solution. Enter the Kingdom.
 - iii. And unlike riches or outer stability, this inner life of the Kingdom is not something transient and fleeting. Riches come and go, health comes and goes, the people in our lives come and go, happiness comes and goes. But Jesus does not come and go. *Behold, I am with you always even unto the end of the age Matthew 28:20.* Stability, security, safety. Forever. Though all else fails. *“I will never leave you nor forsake you.” Hebrews 13:5*
 - iv. This brings a story to mind. My family had been visiting a very ill member of our church, whose condition steadily worsened. Sadly, things became so terribly difficult for him in the end, in so many ways. Tremendous suffering. It was so hard to know what to say, or to do. Near the end of his life, he lost his ability to speak. At one point, my wife asked him, “are you ok?” To which, with great effort, in a voice that had been reduced to a whisper, he simply responded, “I have everything.”
 - v. The offer of a vibrant, joyful interior strength that no sickness or poverty could ever conquer. This was all good news for the poor and pained, indeed.
- e. “That is all well,” you say, “but wouldn’t it be better yet if Jesus fixed things up for them all the way? Both their interior condition, and also their unfortunate exterior circumstances?
 - i. Yes, it would. And, in fact, in the Beatitudes, Jesus announced that, as a result of the advance of God’s Kingdom, this was happening as well.
4. This takes us beyond the already’s of the Beatitudes, and into the not yet’s. *Those who mourn will be [as in, in the future] comforted*, and so on. That reality, and various other things yet to come, are described there. Or to put it even more accurately, various things that are even now already being brought about by Jesus’s Kingdom work, and will soon reach their full completion.
 - a. But what is the connection between the already’s and the not yet’s of the Beatitudes? Exactly this: when someone enters into the Kingdom, they not only start to get set right from the inside out. They also become a part of the ongoing process of God’s setting everything else right in His world.

- b. Recall again that the overall story of the Bible is the long story of God gradually setting things right, once and for all, on Earth. As Professor Scott McKnight put it, “God is on a mission to get the hell out of earth.” And His setting everything right means everything.
- c. After all, the world of Jesus’s day was a very difficult and dysfunctional place. It needed deep healing and restoration in so many domains. Actually, every society, everywhere has always been like that. Which is why, throughout the Old Testament period, the poor and downtrodden in particular were always looking for God to intervene in human history, calling out to Him, *oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!*, as the prophet Isaiah put it (*Isaiah 64:1*). And actually, their theology was correct. Because all along, that is what was promised by God at the coming of the Kingdom...His intervention to bring about social order and flourishing, justice and peace.
- d. In that regard, let’s read through the lyrics from the song Mary sings when she is pregnant with Jesus, about the type of work that Jesus would bring about.

My soul glorifies the Lord
⁴⁷ *and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*
⁴⁸ *for he has been mindful*
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹ *for the Mighty One has done great things for me—*
holy is his name.
⁵⁰ *His mercy extends to those who fear him,*
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ *He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;*
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
⁵² *He has brought down rulers from their thrones*
but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³ *He has filled the hungry with good things*
but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ *He has helped his servant Israel,*
remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵ *to Abraham and his descendants forever,*
just as he promised our ancestors.” Luke 1

- i. *He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty.*
Sounds like a beatitude to me.
- ii. *He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.*
There’s another one.
- e. That was how Jesus understood His work as well. Here He is quoting the prophet Isaiah.

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor Luke 4:18-19*

- f. By the way, this was nothing new on Jesus’ part. God’s special concern for and frequent intervention on behalf of the disadvantaged, displaced, vulnerable, and disregarded is such a major theme of the whole of Scripture.... from Torah to Revelation.
 - i. *Psalm 103:6*
 - 1. *The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.*
 - ii. Here are some verses from *Psalm 34*
 - 1. *Let the afflicted hear and rejoice.*
 - 2. *This poor man called, and the Lord heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles.*
 - 3. *The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*
 - 4. *Evil will slay the wicked; the foes of the righteous will be condemned. The Lord will rescue his servants; no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.*
- g. But in the work and person of Jesus, the long-awaited time had come when God would do something final about these things, once and for all. A recent worship song entitled “Kingdom Come” by the group KXC, expresses this theme of the Beatitudes perfectly:

Lift up your heads, all the weak and the poor
The Lord is at hand and His kingdom is yours

Lift up your hearts, all who suffer and mourn
The Lord is at hand and His kingdom is yours

Lift up your eyes, all who hunger for more
The Lord is at hand and His kingdom is yours

- h. And Jesus is therefore announcing in His Beatitudes, that in its invasion of human history, the Kingdom of God has already started turning everything upside down.
 - i. Actually, as NT Wright puts it, it is not so much turning everything upside down, as it is turning everything right side up.

- ii. This is the great **inversion principal** that we see so often in the gospels. *The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.*” Matthew 19:30.
 - 1. Inversion is one of the hallmarks of the advance of the Kingdom.
 - iii. Jesus was explaining that, given the arrival of His Kingdom, the ruling evil social and political power structures oppressing the poor and the hungry were now, at last, being confronted and thrown down. Justice-making.
- 5. As NT Wright put it, “This is not about a private spirituality in the present, or an escapist ‘salvation’ in the future. This is about the living God confronting the powers of the world with the news that he is now in charge, and that the mode of his rule is that which was established by ‘his Messiah’, the lamb. ‘Suffering love conquers all’ is the message, as powerful as it is unwelcome (unwelcome, sadly, all too often in the church, as well as in the world).”
 - a. If that sounds odd, if you don’t see how the evil power structures of this world have been particularly confronted in the last couple thousand years, it is because we often fail to appreciate the significance of the advance of the rule of Christ in human history, and the victories this has achieved through and for mankind, especially for the marginalized and downtrodden.
 - i. “Christianity has, despite the sometimes spectacular failures (like the Crusades and Inquisition) of its nominal adherents, been the greatest force for good in the history of mankind, being responsible for the preservation of literacy and learning, the founding of the universities, incalculable contributions to music and the arts, the rise of modern science, the institution of nursing and founding of hospitals, the abolition of slavery, the elevation of the status of women wherever it has gone, relief from poverty and famine, etc.”. – William Lane Craig
 - b. But please be crystal clear that, as NT Wright pointed out, the suffering love of faithful Christ followers, as epitomized on the cross, is the way that the Kingdom of God advances. That is *the* antidote. The only force in the universe powerful enough to overcome the evils of this world, and the evils within each human heart.
 - i. You see, on the one hand... Jesus went to the cross so that we wouldn’t have to. *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. 1 Peter 3:18*
 - ii. But on the other hand, as Peter also points out one chapter earlier in that letter, Christ went to the cross in order to help us be able to do the same.
 - 1. *“If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” 1 Peter 2:20-21*
 - 2. We can note that the person who wrote those words himself was martyred.
 - iii. Called to suffer, for the Kingdom. Christ came to show and teach us the best way of being human. The way of sacrifice. Costly self-giving of our time, our energy, our comfort, our wants, our lives, for those in need around us.

Reaching out in persistent, and at times painful, love for those in our lives who may or may not deserve it. Who may or may not mistreat us, or speak ill of us.

Philippians 2 says:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

What mindset is that?

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own
advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

iv. And so, yes, Jesus issued a call to war to all who would follow Him. And yes, the advance of God's Kingdom is a fiercely conflictual struggle against the wicked power structures of this world. And yet, this is a type of warfare which operates in quite the opposite way that warfare typically does.

1. Napoleon the Conqueror himself noted this fact about Jesus's Kingdom and marveled at it. He noticed that all these great conquerors of history, Alexander the Great and all the rest, tried to impose their will on diverse people groups and unite them under a common rule. Their tools were force and coercion. This was never ultimately successful, and those empires fell. But to facilitate His rule, in His Kingdom, Jesus uses the tools of humble service and love. And His Kingdom has united diverse people across time and space under a banner of undying loyalty.
2. In fact, in spreading His movement, Jesus explicitly spoke against coercion, and against the use of force.
 - a. *Those who live by the sword die by the sword. Matthew 26:52,* He told Peter after Peter took up arms against their enemies.
 - b. Or when they meet resistance in their work, the disciples ask Jesus, *"Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven and destroy those people?" Luke 9:54.* "Nope" says Jesus, "I don't."

- c. Now, despite these clear teachings of Christ, there have always been Christians who are of a different persuasion. Suffering love doesn't sound very appealing at all. They would prefer instead to kick some butt, the old-fashioned way. They are of the opinion that the Kingdom of God is something that we do need to force unto the world. That we all need to band together as Christians and exert our corporate power, our collective civic influence, our rights in the political and social arena, and get this ship turned around, ASAP, where everyone is signing the same tune, the correct tune, the Christian tune, whether they want to or not. At various points in history, this type of thing has taken on very obvious forms of politicized expressions of Christianity, as in the Crusades. In less obvious forms, it is still very much a popular attitude among Christians today. To that, *my Kingdom is not of this world*, says Jesus (*John 18:36*)
- v. Instead of that, in the beatitudes, we see that God's agents doing the actual work of bringing His Kingdom of Heaven to Earth are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. If we only had the eyes to see, they are the important ones, the real movers and shakers. Not the haughty, worldly powerbrokers. Kingdom lives in their humility, in their simple and often overlooked acts of longsuffering and love, are everywhere breaking cycles of retaliation and ushering in healing and restoration, New Creation. These often-neglected people, the least of these, are the important people. *The salt of the earth. The light of the world.* So often, it is your throw aways, your cast outs that are the ones saving this world, was the teaching of Jesus.

6. (END OF AUDIO SEGMENT ONE)

7. (START OF AUDIO SEGMENT TWO)

- a. It all raises a question though, doesn't it? If Christianity is a non-violent movement of humble love and of service, why is there often such severe conflict involved in the advance of the Kingdom? Retaliation and resistance for Kingdom workers? Who would attack persons advocating a society of peace, love, and humble service?
 - i. To get the answer to that question, maybe ask Martin Luther King Jr.
 - 1. Because, you see, if you, as a general principal of living, refuse to cooperate with evil, and insist on loving your neighbor, and promoting their good, you will invariably get in the way of the powers that are currently having their way in this world, which they are often doing at the expense of some unfortunate victim. These powers often have established their position of power through corruption, oppression, and manipulation, and are at work doing what they well please. So, a refusal to cooperate, or to endorse their behavior, is a threat to their power, and is therefore quite often going to be conflictual.

- ii. And on top of that, your opting out of their type of behaviors is an implicit criticism of their type of behavior. The kind of life that you are living itself is challenging and deeply uncomfortable for them to look at. And that can get people very upset. Take Cain and Able, as such an example.
- iii. These types of tensions are always present when the Kingdom advances. At the highest orders of structure, such as large governments, all the way down the line, to the smallest orders of structure, such as the workplace or the family.
 - 1. *Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on...They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” Luke 12:51-53*
- b. This is all what got Jesus and His followers in trouble with the religious authorities.
 - i. God’s beautiful and healing rule had at last burst forth on the scene of human history, and was spilling out of Jesus and into the Jewish people. But sadly, we see from the gospels that many of the religious leaders of Jesus’s didn’t want that. Why? Well, there were exceptions but, on the whole, they had an entirely different set of priorities. Actually, all sorts of complicated, overlapping, priorities in a variety of domains.
 - ii. First, as, N.T. Wright pointed out, economic oppression was rife in Judean society. And these religious leaders, in so many subtle and sneaky ways, were often the ones on top, exploiting and robbing the common Jewish folks. Some of them were very wealthy, and wielded significant political capital. The ancient historian Flavius Josephus noted that the Sadducees were power-hungry, arrogant, and rude to common people. Many of them were closely tied in with Roman power structures, carefully walking various political tight ropes. They were the kinds of people who had no problem killing someone who would get in their way.
 - 1. And Jesus confronted that economic abuse, and the abuse of their power generally. Called them out on it.
 - 2. Religion being misused, monetized for selfish ends. Sound familiar? Keep an eye out, folks. A lot of wolves today, in sheep’s clothing still in Christian circles today. And they are usually very respectful, well kept, charming. Hard to detect. How can you sniff them out? Look at what they do with their power, with their money. And if you can’t get a good look at that, if they won’t let you, then that’s a red flag in and of itself.
 - iii. Second, the religious leaders were violently opposed to Jesus because a messiah of extreme humility and of suffering love, rather than a king and conqueror of pagan nations, a messiah calling Israel out of her own evil, a messiah calling these leaders out of their nationalistic obsession with symbolic ritual, out of their inward-focused separatism, and into sacrificial care for all the nations, was the exact opposite of what they wanted. Actually, above all, they wanted the fiercely oppressive Roman government off their backs.

1. And *Render unto Caesar what is Caesars*. Matthew 22:21 is what He told them. What a tremendous slap in the face!
2. And, what made it all the more difficult to swallow for them was that, as Jesus pointed out, the movement of God that these religious leaders themselves were resisting, was inviting any and all comers, and some of the gentiles, even some romans, were joining up!
 - a. *I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Matthew 8:11.*
 - b. Now many Jewish people had a tendency to look down on Gentiles, as godless, debaucherous heathens, and ritualistically unclean, this was all simply too much.
 - c. Remember, the religious authorities of that time assumed, and taught, that God was on their side. They were the chosen, ethnically, and as the sovereign state of Israel. They were His representatives.
 - d. Jesus had the incredibly difficult job of pointing out that the religious rulers of Israel, far from their being the instruments of God’s action, were a part of the Kingdom of Darkness that needed to be advanced against. That YHWY Himself was confronting them and their whole corrupt system, rather than acting on their behalf. Jesus told them that He Himself was inaugurating God’s Kingdom, and that many of them wanted nothing to do with Him, and therefore they wanted nothing to do with the priorities of YHWY.
3. Why was Jesus was so absolutely scorching and scathing with these religious leaders? Because they were supposed to be ushering people into the Kingdom, but instead they were totally recalcitrant in resisting YHWH’s mission of healing and hope.
 - a. And so, Jesus made it a point to warn the regular citizens of Israel that their religious leaders were a profound force for evil. He pointed out that while setting themselves up as devout teachers to be emulated, they were in fact dangerously misleading many others onto a dark path.
 - b. *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are. Matthew 23:15*
 - c. *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. Matthew 23:13*

- iv. Why did the Jewish leaders want to kill Jesus? It was a power struggle. What else could it be, besides a power struggle, when Jesus went in there, and started overturning the tables in their temple, criticizing the way things were being done under their watch there? When He started turning their own followers against them? Predicting that their temple itself would soon be destroyed as an act of judgment, given their persistent rebellion and evil? This was the Kingdom of God advancing against their own little kingdom.
- c. And after Jesus's ascension, the earliest Christians came across their own power-struggles in their own work of expanding His Kingdom in the world. After all, the age-old way of human ruling was still out and about. Domination, brutality and violence were the instruments of rule for governments of that day. We romanticize ancient Roman and Greek cultures but they were ruthless in ways we can hardly comprehend today. Professor Matthew Trundle points out. "Violence permeated the topography of antiquity, from organized warfare to everyday social encounters. It made slaves of some and masters of others and enforced this social order. The threat of violence and fear of reprisal were essential components in maintaining unequal relationships of exploitation and subservience between the slave and free person."
 - i. As an example, the slave population of ancient Rome was at least equal to that of freedmen. And slaves were considered property under Roman law and had no legal personhood. In fact, most slaves would never be freed. And unlike Roman citizens, they could be subjected to corporal punishment, sexual exploitation (prostitutes were often slaves), torture and summary execution.
 - ii. And further, the Roman government, and other governments of that time, were insistent on absolute power over their citizens.
 - 1. For instance, there are ancient historical accounts of the running out of wood to be used in crucifixion by the Romans, is how extensively that type of physical torture was used in suppressing dissension.
 - 2. As another illustration of this, when the Roman Emperor Decius took power, he issued an edict intended to act as an Empire-wide loyalty oath to himself, sanctified through the Roman religion. Everyone in the Empire was required to perform a sacrifice to the Roman gods and to the well-being of the emperor.
 - a. What about people who bowed the knee to Jesus? Who would not give their ultimate political and religious allegiance to a worldly emperor? Who refused to participate in these Roman pagan rituals? In that case, they had no legal standing or protection, at all. Economically, socially, politically. That was the policy of that government.
 - b. The pressure was intense. In fact, we can see in those early letters and in other ancient documents that because of this, some early Christians fell away from the faith.
 - iii. But it went further than that still. Because as N.T. Wright pointed out, how did ancient empires react to significant threats like this? They must be eliminated.

1. Early Christians were at various points actively victimized, systematically, as a matter of official Roman governmental policy. They were sought out, killed, beaten, tortured, mocked. They lived in constant danger.
2. And after the Romans, the early Christians were similarly persecuted by the Persians.
 - a. In fact, medieval soldiers who came through what is now Turkey in wartimes recorded entire cities devoid of people. Because many of these Christians had gone and lived in underground caves. Archaeologists have found evidence of over forty massive subterranean networks of caves in the area that were used for that purpose. Some of them had up to 70,000 people living there. Christian communities first came to these caves in the second century, and lived in them for hundreds of years afterwards.
- iv. Here is how Paul articulated the experience of early Christians in *Romans 8* (verse 36), echoing the Psalmist, “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”
- v. But we must understand that the early Christians were not persecuted for being gracious and loving. And they were not persecuted for telling people they could go to heaven when they die if they wanted to. They were persecuted for insisting and acting as though Christ was King, now, here, on earth. Yes, disciples of Christ would always give the due civic allegiance to the rulers of the day, as Christ had commanded them to. But in any situation where that pushed up against the Law of Love, their ultimate allegiance to the King of Kings. Which meant that they would not and did not cooperate with the widespread coercion, abuse, racism, sexism, or exploitation favored by the power structures of their time.
- vi. *They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus. Acts 17: 7*
 1. Who is really in charge here? Caesar or Jesus?
- vii. Well then, why did Christianity spread so rapidly in the ancient world? Who would join a community like that in such a hostile and difficult context?
 1. When we look at the historical record, it seemed to have to do less with evangelistic meetings and outreach events and more to do with the Christian community’s consistent care for and acceptance of the marginalized and second-class members of their societies. These marginalized folks were deeply touched by the love of God that they encountered through the community of Jesus followers, and therefore joined the movement themselves.
 - a. It was a lot of lower-class people. *Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth, as Paul noted in 1 Corinthians 1:26.*

2. As one example of this in action, consider the activity of early Christians during the two great plagues of the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. This were devastating pandemics, highly contagious, with up to a third of the population dying. As a result, common practice, at the first appearance of symptoms, was to try to minimize contact with the infected by throwing the sick out into the street to die. Christians on the other hand, often met their obligation to care for the sick, at great risk to themselves.
 - a. Suffering love is always the way that the Kingdom advances.
- d. Now, we can observe that today, fortunately, the political climate for Christians is much more favorable in many parts of the world, then it was for Jesus and His followers in their day.
 - i. And, actually, the reason for this is yet another gift of the advance of the Kingdom of Jesus to the world. The gift of religious tolerance. After all, how much religious tolerance was there in the ancient world? As we have seen, not much at all. But that was not the way of Jesus, who loved His enemies, and forbade coercion. And as Christianity, and Christian values spread, these values spread. And despite our living in a somewhat post-Christian context, the modern West maintains many Christian values, such as religious tolerance.
 - ii. So, the situation is much better today, but on the other hand, tensions will always remain.
 1. For instance, our just being honest and straightforward in the workplace can be tremendously challenging in many environments, where unfair or dishonest systems of operation are often subtly in place.
- e. But this all makes me wonder what would happen with the Kingdom of God on Earth if the American church today took the opposite path from the Jews of Jesus day, and made the radical decision to simply give up insisting on our rights and fretting about our survival? If we stopped spending our time streaming podcasts about the culture wars, and our money promoting our own political interests by lobbying PACs, and the other power-brokers of our day, to the tune of billions of dollars? If instead, we took all that time and all those colossal sums of money and instead reached out with them, in compassionate, suffering love, to our desperate and oppressed neighbors, here and around the world? What do you think would happen to the Christian movement, if we did that?
 - i. Self-preservation versus self-giving.
 - ii. *For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. Matthew 16:25*
- f. People ask, “why doesn’t God do anything about all the evil and suffering in the world?” He has, and He is. But the question is, will we take up our vocation as His suffering lovers of the afflicted, the brokenhearted, the destitute? And if not, can we really say that we are on Jesus’s side? That we have joined His movement?

- i. It's not a glamorous job. At the present time, Jesus's patient Kingdom workers often are not the ones on top. They are instead often ground down and brutalized by the ruthless and powerful. But they are the ones who in the end will rule and reign. They, the last, shall be first when the New Order is fully established.
- ii. And as N.T. Wright pointed out, things like humility, patience, kindness, and gentleness sound soft, weak. But they are not. They require profound strength. Those attributes are very difficult to acquire. And very difficult to maintain. And those powerful and heroic efforts of self-sacrifice, if we could only see them for what they really are, look below the surface of things, are what are bringing about cataclysmic changes in the very fabric of things. Changes which are even now rushing and pushing everything toward its ultimate conclusion. Those who *live holy and godly lives look forward to the day of God and speed its coming*, as 2 Peter 3:12 points out.
- iii. Because in not too long at all, the setting right of everything will be complete.
 1. *The hungry?*
 - a. *They will be satisfied.*
 2. *The weeping?*
 - a. *They will be comforted. They will laugh*, actually is what Jesus says.
 3. *The pure in heart?* They will see what they have been longing to see all along, God Himself.
 4. *The merciful?* Who have oh-so patiently endured offenses and maintained a tender heart towards the folks giving them a hard time?
 - a. Instead of more mistreatment, at last, *they will be shown mercy.*
 5. *The meek*, the weak, and the taken advantage of?
 - a. Not the brash, and pushy, but instead *the meek will inherit the earth.*
 6. *The peacemakers, the reconcilers, the unifiers?*
 - a. When all the cards are on the table for everyone to see, they will be given the Divine stamp of approval.
 7. *Those who hunger and thirsted for righteousness?* Who yearn for things to be set right, to the way they should be? Who are sick of all yuck and problems both within and without them?
 - a. Soon enough, they are not going to be hungering or thirsting any more.
 8. *And all those suffering lovers who have given up so much, spreading the Kingdom at great cost to themselves?*
 - a. Jesus tells them to just go ahead and get started right now with, *rejoicing and being glad, because great, indeed, will be their reward in heaven.*

8. You might have noticed that we have spent some time looking at the blessed in the Beatitudes. But we have not looked at those woes, those warnings. Let's do that now. Why didn't Jesus say, "blessed are the rich, for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven?"
 - a. First of all, we must appreciate that Jesus was making a generalized statement. Plenty of times, the rich do end up in the Kingdom. You will find many examples of this in the New Testament. And sometimes the poor refuse to enter the Kingdom, and you will find plenty of that as well in the New Testament.
 - i. But Jesus put things the way He did there because He was trying to correct the way people thought about things. They had the same confusion then, that we have today.
 1. Just because you are wealthy and healthy, does not mean you are really, in the deepest sense, well-off. You can't tell who is really well off and who is really destitute, with that type of superficial analysis.
 - b. And by the way, this is the way Jesus often taught. He challenged the common ways of thinking around Him. As Dallas Willard put it, "He taught against the prevailing assumptions."
 - i. Here he is teaching the same thing in a different context... *"How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"* Jesus taught his disciples in *Mark 10:23* after the rich young ruler turns away. And it says that His disciples were amazed at His words. So, Jesus repeats Himself. *"Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."* And *they were even more amazed* it says.
 1. Why were they so exceedingly blown away by this particular teaching? Because they, like everyone else in that time, had simply assumed that the rich were the ones in the Kingdom, and the poor folks were the ones on the outside.
 2. That is why, another time, they asked Jesus, *"Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" John 9:2*. What was the assumption? Poverty, sickness, and suffering were the result of wickedness, or of a lack of faith, and of God's judgment of that on a person. Whereas wealth and health were an indicator of their righteous standing. The same type of thinking that is popular in some Christian circles today. But not so, says Jesus. *"Neither this man nor his parents sinned,"* He answers them.
 - c. And along these lines, in the Beatitudes, Jesus was actually pointing out that as a result of what God was now doing, many of the wealthy and secure were being cast to the bottom of the barrel, and many of the yucky nobodies were being lifted up out of it.
 - i. And that was terribly scandalous, offensive. For instance, how would a pastor or Christian retreat leader today like to hear something like this:
 - ii. *Yes, and I tell you that tax-collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God in front of you! Matthew 21:31*

- iii. You know who really didn't like Jesus? Self-righteous folks. Which unfortunately, included many of the religious leaders of Jesus's day.
 - 1. After all, Jesus, by way of trying to help them out, told the self-righteous people He came across quite plainly, the same thing He told everyone. That they were not, in fact, righteous at all.
- iv. As a present-day example of Kingdom inversion, I had a friend, and over a couple of years, we used to meet every few months for meals, and chat about Christianity. This was an extremely successful, wealthy, intelligent, and exceedingly devout Christian, whose life was full of religious activity and impressive charitable work. He had served in the military. He had a large, healthy, close family with many children, and grandchildren. He had read many huge and complex theological works.
 - 1. But the more I got to know him, the more I became aware that he understood God to be fiercely sectarian, harsh, and not grace but performance based in His evaluation and dealings with us. And also, unfortunately, I came to discover that, this man was generally much more interested in pushing his own viewpoints, than in listening to others.
 - 2. When I spoke to him frankly about these things, and about the true nature of the gospel, he sent me a fiery ten-paragraph email and never spoke with me again.
- v. On the other hand, not too long ago, we visited a friend's brother in the hospital. He was addicted to alcohol and various other drugs. He had deeply hurt so many people, and caused such terrible difficulty for his family. Constantly in and out of AA and rehab, and his parent's basement. And his body had paid the price. His organs were shutting down. He was in terrible physical pain at times from repeated surgeries on a large open wound on his leg. He had no friends. His young child had been taken away from him, and he had not seen his son in years, nor did he know where his son was. He was in emotional turmoil and pain as he spoke with us. He wondered aloud if he would ever walk again. He struggled to see where God was even at work in his life. But at the same time, he clearly expressed a real understanding and acceptance of God's provision for him on the cross. He died shortly after that visit. One of the profoundly well off.
 - 1. Just wait until we see him as he really is, now. So beautiful, happy and free.
 - 2. *The last shall be first, and the first shall be last.*
- vi. Jesus told a lot of His own inversion stories. *Take Lazarus and the rich man. Luke 16:19-31*
 - 1. And why does the arrival of the Kingdom often bring such inversions?
 - a. Because God hates rich people? No. He loves them just as furiously and passionately as the poor.

- b. But look at the rich man in that Lazarus story. The issue that he had is so often the case for the wealthy. We rich often have our own little kingdoms, our own projects, our own cozy life and way of doing things, and are content with those. Sin within, and injustice and suffering without, are often just a faint and distant worry, when you can sip cappuccinos at your leisure every morning, living insulated in your own little pleasure bubble.
 - c. In the Beatitudes, sadly, Jesus notes that the rich are often already satisfied, laughing, spoken well of, and comfortable. Why shake things up by joining the front lines of His dangerous revolution of suffering love? To the invitation of Kingdom living, mostly the answer of the comfy is a polite, “no thanks.”
- d. And so, what does this great inversion principal, that is the hallmark of the advance of the Kingdom, mean for us today?
 - i. In the contemporary West, by way of simple comparison with the rest of the world and of history, the vast majority of us are the rich and the comfortable and the well-fed from those Beatitudes. Which means that we need to carefully heed these woes, these warnings of Jesus. He spoke them to us. How should we respond?
 - ii. I will tell you what not to do. “Oh, the poor are blessed you say...well, no problem, I’ll just go and be poor than, give away all my money.” Nope. It doesn’t work like that. That doesn’t get to the heart of the issue at all. As we already discussed, we should not make legalisms out of the Beatitudes, or out of any of the teachings of Jesus.
 - 1. All sorts of poor folks are just as greedy and envious and obsessed with wealth as you can be. And some rich folks are just as generous and content and free of the controlling power of money as you can be.
 - 2. *Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 1 Timothy 6:9.*
 - a. That applies the same to the poor and to the rich alike.
 - b. Having money isn’t the problem. A trust of money, an excessive desire for money, is the problem.
 - iii. So, we Christians today in the West, who have a lot of money, be generous with it, be a good steward of it, is the message of the New Testament.
 - 1. *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. Matthew 6:19.*
 - a. Do what you need to take care of yourself and your family and save some for a rainy day and retirement and all the rest of it but don’t go beyond that into storing up treasures for yourself. Just piling it up beyond what you need or will use. God didn’t

give it to you for you to sit on a big pile of it. He gave it to you to use for His Kingdom.

2. And rather than trying to get yourself off the hook by becoming a pauper, take creative ownership of the increased responsibility, the increased resources, that you have been given.
 - a. *Luke 16: "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So, if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?"*
- iv. The Kingdom way is not poverty, but stewardship. But we, as rich stewards, in particular, must always feel the heat of these warnings from Jesus. As in Mark 4: 19, where He discussed *the deceitfulness of wealth*. Beware the deceitfulness of wealth. Understand that wealth, health, comfort, being well feed, and the rest of it is a constant danger. It is just so hard to live a life of contentious reliance on God when your cupboards and bank accounts are overflowing.
 1. As it has been said, the early church contended with persecution. We, today in the West, contend with seduction. Which is more difficult to overcome, do you think?
 2. Jesus tried to warn us, *You cannot serve two masters*, folks. *You cannot serve both God and money*. Has your money and comfort and health and safety and enjoyment mastered you, or have you mastered them?
 - a. How much time do you spend thinking about, planning for, and engaged in these things?
 - b. How much time do you spend thinking about, planning for, and engaging in abiding in the Vine, in inner transformation, in sowing the seed of the Kingdom in those whom God has given to you?
 - c. How much time do you spend pursuing your own interests and affairs, and how much tending to and looking after the needs of others?
 - d. *Where your treasure is, there your heart will be.*
 - i. Where is your heart? What do you treasure?
 - ii. Nothing wrong with us having nice things, having hobbies, being comfortable, enjoying ourselves. Those are blessings. Those are good things. But let's just make sure those things don't have us.
- v. Hard questions. What should you do if after introspection, you are not where you need to be? How can you overcome the constant seduction of comfort?

1. There is only one way. We need to learn to see straight, from the Master Himself. Jesus invites you to see your earthly treasures for what they are. And the treasure of the Kingdom for what it is...the one and only Pearl of Great Price. Only that vision, of the all-surpassing beauty and worth of a life in the Kingdom will give us the tremendous spiritual longing that we need to push through our complacency.
 2. Don't be deceived by the superficial glitz and glitter of wealth, or by the illusion of security and comfort. *Moth and rust* are coming for all those things. They will all pass by, along with *the fleeting vapor of your life itself* (*Ecclesiastes*), in hardly the blink of an eye.
 3. A lot of rich people are interested in returns on investment. You wanna know how to get the greatest interest rate in the universe? Risk free? Guaranteed returns? Put your money and time and energy to work for the Kingdom. Do the hard work that is being asked of you, the work of suffering love. If you do this, then, in hardly the blink of an eye, when the vapor of your life has past, you can lay down to die contentedly, knowing that when the great Kingdom reversal is at last complete, when everything is finally flipped all the way upside down for good, you will be found to have been on the right side of things.
9. To summarize this talk:
- a. The beatitudes were Jesus's explanations of what it meant now that the Kingdom had finally arrived, in His work and person, on the scene in human history.
 - b. It meant that everything had already dramatically been changed, and for good. For instance, people in terrible and unfortunate circumstances, were no longer necessarily unfortunate. Because now, they had the possibility of access to God, and to the complete renovation of their interior life. And the deep, abiding joy, peace, and everything else that comes with that. And they had the privilege of joining His movement in setting the world right. Which they often did.
 - c. And the Beatitudes speak to the profound effect that this all was having, and would increasingly continue to have, on human history. The oppressed and victimized were at last receiving their long-awaited relief, as a result of Jesus's Kingdom workers reaching out to them in suffering, self-giving love. Which would result in the non-violent throwing down of the oppressors and other evil power structures at work in the world. An effort which Jesus Himself will definitely conclude, shortly.
 - d. But the question remains...will we Christians in the wealthy and comfortable West join this incredible movement? Or will we double down on self-preservation, defensive efforts, and anxiety?
 - e. The choice is ours. But it is clear from the teachings of Jesus who, at the end of things, will be found to have been on the right side of history.

Father, thank you that you really are setting everything right for the desperately struggling people everywhere, who you care so much about. Give us the vision of how much more

incredible, rewarding, exciting, worthwhile, and lastingly meaningful it is to be a part of this work of yours, than sticking with life as usual. Give us the courage we need to do this work with you and for you.

- Amen