

Question: What are the Beatitudes?

Answer: The word Beatitude comes from the Latin word *beatus* which means “blessed” or “happy”. Literally translated, Beatitude means “Blessed Teaching”. The Beatitudes can be found in two places in the New Testament. In Matthew’s gospel, the Beatitudes are found in chapter five, commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. In Luke’s gospel the Beatitudes are presented at the Sermon on the Plain in chapter six. Whether the Beatitudes were presented by Jesus on a plain or mountaintop or, if they were presented in two different places is irrelevant. What does matter is that in a very real way as modern disciples hearing the gospel, we are called to respond to this radical teaching just as the first hearers of the gospel were. Below are the Beatitudes according to Matthew:

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

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

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.

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

Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.

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

Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you because of me.

Reading through the Beatitudes it becomes clear that Jesus’ teaching is focusing on the marginalized of society. In fact, Jesus is the consummate example of a man embracing those on the fringes of society through service, “For the Son of Man did not come to be served to but serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). A few additional verses from Mark further support the theme of service and helping others, “(W)hoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all” (Mark 10:43-44); and “If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be last of all and the servant of all” (Mark 9:36). The point of Jesus teachings in the Beatitudes is to bring to light the fact that those who suffer unrighteousness, adversity, and do not possess in this life the power, authority, and righteousness of the rich will someday receive their reward in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus makes it clear in Matthew’s gospel that the ultimate goal is for each of us to reach the kingdom of heaven ourselves. To attain this goal, Jesus has a twofold formula presented in the Beatitudes. The first regards the present world we live in. In particular, Jesus addresses and calls all to action in this world by seeking justice, being merciful, and striving for peace even to the point of being persecuted. It cannot be overstated that Jesus is calling us (hearers of the gospel) to action here and now. The second and equally important aspect of the Beatific formula states that those who do suffer in this world, and those that seek righteousness in this world will receive their reward in the next; which means that they will inherit the kingdom of heaven. It can be stated and justified through Jesus’ presentation of the Beatitudes that an authentic rubric for salvation exists for us as modern Christians.

But, what if we do not mourn, or what happens if we are not poor in spirit? Jesus does not say in the Sermon on the Mount that we must experience every aspect of the Beatitudes in a perpetual manner. Instead, we must focus on those aspects of the Beatitudes that we can actively take part in. Whether or not one is meek or poor in spirit, we all can undoubtedly take part in hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Whether it is here at home or in the world abroad, we can do our part to seek righteousness in the world by volunteering our time at a soup kitchen, praying for the right to life, and working for social rights and activism. Similarly, we can all strive for cleanness of heart. In radical contrast to the 1st century world in which ritual purity was the emphasis, Jesus calls all to forget about ritual purity and focus on interior purity. The heart, as the center of feeling and thinking in the 1st century world is comparable to our modern conception of the mind. This calls us to seek purity in thought and action. We can also be peacemakers. Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day are perhaps the greatest 20th century examples of Catholics seeking peace in the world. Merton sought peace by articulating and investigating the relationship all human beings share with one another. In her life, Dorothy Day sought peace and rights for the homeless, the hungry, and the forsaken. Becoming increasingly conscious of Jesus’ call in the Beatitudes may lead us into his last “blessed teaching” that says, “Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you.” Persecution may seem a thing of the past, but surprisingly, it still takes place in the world today. Though persecution rarely leads to death in modern context, it does take place through media in the United States and through suppression of religious rights in many third world countries. As disciples, we are called to speak out and against those people and groups who do not allow religious tolerance and respect.