

CHRISTIANS ON THE LEFT.



Prayer Week 2022

For the next five days, we will be taking a look at the first four beatitudes of Jesus (Matthew 5: 3-6).

DAY 1

The sermon on the mount for the last ten years or so has captivated me. So, as a starter, I would like to make some comments about the sermon generally and then for the four remaining days, we will look at the beatitudes.

In the final verses of **Matthew 4 (v 23-25)** we encounter Jesus as a teacher, preacher, and healer. He is teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. And so, we are told, his fame spread.

Then, for me at least, we have a puzzling statement. **Chapter 5** starts with “**seeing the crowds, he went up on the mount..**” and gave what is fairly lengthy teaching. My question is this, why would Jesus stop what is clearly an extremely powerful healing ministry and do that? Surely the need for healing was greater?

It struck me that this is not actually a cessation of his healing ministry but a continuation of it albeit a very different type of healing. The sermon is a call for his people to demonstrate what a kingdom life looks like. And by living this radical alternative and counter-cultural lifestyle, we too provide a form of healing to a troubled and sick world. We become what Jesus refers to after giving his beatitudes as salt and light.

Therefore, the call for Matthew is not just about coming into a personal spiritual relationship with Jesus but is also a call to moral obedience to his commands

As we make a start on the beatitudes, instead of looking at the more traditional interpretation, we will approach them from the perspective of how they speak of the liberation of the marginalised and oppressed

Reflections

The Sermon on the Mount and maybe the rest of Jesus’ teachings are considered to be neglected in much of the church today. Is that true in your experience, and if so why and what are the possible consequences for that neglect?

Today's Prayer Points

1. Pray that we may be a people that demonstrate what a kingdom life looks like.
2. May we be a vessel of healing to a troubled and sick world.
3. May we approach this Prayer Week with open hearts and a willingness to do God's will.

DAY 2

"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3)

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20)

Dallas Willard argues in his book 'The Divine Conspiracy' that the beatitudes are the heart of the sermon on the mount and have proved themselves to be 'the most important teaching ever.' It has also been argued that this first beatitude unlocks the rest of them and is also the key to understanding the whole of the sermon.

Luke's version omits the words '**in spirit**' and just says '**Blessed are the poor**' and therefore, Matthew has been accused of spiritualising the beatitude. Or at least, that is how the church has interpreted it.

So, how are we to understand this beatitude? Most commonly, '**poor in spirit**' has been interpreted to mean humility, the spiritually bankrupt rather than as a concrete blessing to those who are physically poor.

Poor in spirit therefore, has become a positive Christian virtue. However, in Jesus' time being poor in spirit would mean you were in the lowest place in society and definitely not one of those who possess God's kingdom.

Others would strongly disagree that being poor is a virtue in and of itself. I have recently come across the work of Elsa Tamez. She reads the beatitudes through the eyes of **James' (5:1-6)** condemnation of the rich. In her book, 'The Bible of the Oppressed' she condemns the spiritualising of the poor in spirit or praising the benefits of poverty. she argues;

"We must always keep in mind that poverty is an unworthy state that must be changed. I repeat, poverty is not a virtue but an evil that reflects the socioeconomic conditions of inequality in which people live"

For Tamez, God has a bias to the poor and identifies with the poor and marginalised. Therefore, being poor is not a state to be desired and this beatitude is a promise to liberate people from poverty because the liberating power of the kingdom of God is at hand and is there for such as those.

Reflections

What would be your response to the following?

One liberation theologian (Gustavo Gutierrez) when addressing this first beatitude argued that:

1. Poverty is never good but an evil that must be opposed

2. Poverty is not simply an opportunity for charity but a degrading force that denigrates human dignity and needs to be opposed
3. Poverty is not a result of fate or laziness, but is due to structural injustices that privileges some while marginalising others

Therefore, this beatitude shows that the kingdom of God is at work against poverty and it is something that we should be engaged in also.

Today's Prayer Points

1. Pray for those in poverty in the UK and across the world
2. Pray for radical changes in our economy to eradicate poverty
3. Pray for individuals, churches and agencies endeavouring to alleviate poverty nationally and locally

DAY 2

"Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4)

Blessed are you who weep now for you will laugh" (Luke 6:21)

One of the most common ways to understand mourning is being broken-hearted. And concerning this beatitude, mourning has been seen as grieving for one's own personal and individual sins. This view of mourning is an overemphasis on personal repentance.

Again, as we saw with the **'Blessed are the poor in spirit'**, we do not give a complete interpretation by limiting its scope. It is, I believe, critical that we understand this statement by Jesus to include a repenting of one's involvement in the structures of sin and injustice. The action of mourning must also encompass the large array of societal sinful actions which among others include;

- Global Warming
- Racism
- Sexism
- Ethnic Cleansing
- Economic Exploitation
- War
- etc

All of which should bring us to a place of grieving and mourning.

John Dear, the American Catholic priest and peace activist, has paraphrased this beatitude this way; "Blessed are the billions who mourn their loved ones to starvation, injustice, relievable disease and war - from Hiroshima and Vietnams to El Salvador and Iraq" And today we could add Ukraine.

"Blessed are those who mourn" suggests human agency whereas **"for they shall be comforted"** speaks of divine agency. The call is for us to grieve over, strive against and speak out against that which causes all this suffering. And we call upon the God of justice to act against injustice.

Reflections

John Dear in 'The Beatitudes of Peace' describes grief as a spiritual practice. As we take on the heart of God and see how he sees and feel how he feels, then our hearts will be broken and he the God of peace and the God of all comfort will comfort us.

By describing mourning as a spiritual practice, does this come as a new thought to you and could you incorporate this into your spiritual disciplines?

Today's Prayer Points

1. Take a moment to grieve over the injustice in this world.
2. Cry to God that he would bring justice.
3. Pray that the victims' voices would be heard by our politicians
4. Pray that our hearts would be stirred to act

DAY 4

"Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5)

There is no Luke parallel

This beatitude is a direct quote from **Psalms 37:11**

How are we to understand this beatitude? There have been a variety of different interpretations of which we look at some now.

"Blessed are the little people because they will be granted the earth" This is another way of saying "poor in spirit".

So, the first beatitude is for the poor, the second is for those who mourn and this one is for the unaggressive.

The word meek or humble has lost much of its meaning in English. Some have argued that it corresponds to lowliness or powerlessness in the eyes of the world. Meekness is often seen as a weakness. And who wants to be described as weak? Meekness or humility goes against the culture prevalent today of being dynamically assertive, those who push to make things happen because it's the aggressive that inherit their earth. It's impossible to possess your piece of the earth through gentleness. Or to quote a famous line from the Simon and Garfunkel song, 'Blessed,' 'Blessed are the sat upon, spat upon, ratted on'

Of course, the words humble/meek are found elsewhere in the bible.

The word is used to describe Moses in **Numbers 12:13** - "a very meek man, more than all the people on the face of the earth". As an aside, I have always been amused by this when I think of who actually wrote this. It was Moses himself.

We see the word being used in the life of Jesus

Matthew 11:29 - "Take my yoke upon you for I am humble and gentle"

Matthew 21:5 - "Behold your king is coming to you, humble and sitting on a donkey"

The epitome of meekness and humility in Jesus can be found in Philippians 2:6-11 as he models for us

to imitate the non-exploitative and sacrificial life.

Another popular understanding of biblical meekness is someone who is surrendered to God. Clarence Jordan described this as being 'tamed' in the sense that the will has been tamed by its master and is now fully obedient to the master's command. And it is in this way that we should be surrendered fully to God. Meekness, therefore, is not weakness at all but power under the control of the master.

Reflections

However, we understand 'meekness', it is clear that Jesus instead of praising the proud, arrogant, haughty and violent, helps lift the humble, lowly and gentle. Something that seems so contrary to today.

In power centric Rome at the time of Jesus, meekness was seen as weakness and most definitely not a virtue. How does that reflect our own culture today?

How do you think meekness fits into the image of God?

How did Jesus demonstrate meekness?

How can that work out in our lives today?

Today's Prayer Points

1. Surrender our lives afresh to God. Pray that he would use us powerfully for his kingdom.
2. May we be salt and light in the political arena. May we bring humility and compassion to our campaigns, chambers, and committee rooms.
3. Pray for the tone of politics. May politicians and tweeters treat each other with respect.

DAY 5

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness/justice for they shall be satisfied"
(Matthew 5:6)

The idea of righteousness is a key concept in the sermon on the mount and throughout Matthew's gospel. We find it twice in the beatitudes, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

But what does righteousness mean? For myself, within the evangelical protestant tradition, I have always been taught that righteousness here is addressing imputed righteousness. This is where the imputation of Christ's righteousness or the crediting of righteousness to the believer's account. The act whereupon repentance and belief in Christ, we are forensically declared righteous. This righteousness is not our own but has been imputed to us. Therefore, to hunger and thirst after righteousness is to hunger and thirst for salvation.

However, when we examine the Old Testament understanding of the equivalent word, we see a richer and more nuanced understanding. There, the word carries the idea of "restorative justice." It speaks of how God acts to save. It is also something that we not only receive but also something we are called to participate in.

Taking this into account, the fourth beatitude of Jesus could be translated as "those who hunger and thirst for justice" which refuses to reduce its meaning to personal or private piety and is closer to the overall emphasis of the sermon on the mount. And an expectation of a way of life as a follower of

Jesus, a participation in God's justice.

In this beatitude, we are called to pursue and seek justice or the common good. By reducing it to the private or personal we have stripped it of its fullness and sanitised it of its power.

Reflections

What would be your response to the following quote by Ron Dart in his book "Beatitudes"?

"An interest in spirituality that lacks a hunger and thirst for justice is merely an opiate, a diversion. Justice is about asking why poverty exists, why we war continually, why injustice so often wins the day, who are the power elite that perpetrate such evils and what can be done about it all?"

Today's Prayer Points

1. Pray that we would continue to pursue justice
2. Pray for those among us who are weary. May they be refreshed by God
3. Pray for divine opportunities to speak up.
4. Pray for CotL to have influence within the Labour Party and the UK Church



Tim Morley

This year's Prayer Week Devotional has been written by CotL Theologian Tim Morley. Tim is based in Liverpool and is a regular speaker at Christian on the Left events and Political Leadership Programme. He recently led our series on Jubilee Economics.