

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 2018



The Sermon on the Mount begins with Jesus ascending the mountain with crowds gathered around him. How will the Lord begin? He begins by pronouncing a certain kind of person fortunate. We call these pronouncements “beatitudes,” from the Latin word for happiness or blessedness. Let’s see how the whole group is put together.

There are eight beatitudes worded in the same way. Verse 11 could be viewed as a ninth one, but it is really an expansion of verse 10 and is worded differently from the others. It says, *“Blessed are you when others revile you.”* None of the others say, *“Blessed are you.”* It is probably an expansion of verse 10, which says, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.”* The reviling in verse 11 is a specific instance of the persecution in verse 10.

You can see that the eight beatitudes of verses 3–10 are a unit when you look at the first and the eighth. Notice the promise of the first beatitude in verse 3, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* And notice the promise of the eighth beatitude in verse 10, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* Both have the identical promise, *“For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

But the other six beatitudes sandwiched between these two are all different.

- Verse 4: *“For they shall be comforted.”*
- Verse 5: *“For they shall inherit the earth.”*
- Verse 6: *“For they shall be satisfied.”*
- Verse 7: *“For they shall receive mercy.”*
- Verse 8: *“For they shall see God.”*
- Verse 9: *“For they shall be called sons of God.”*

Notice that all of these are promises for the future. “They shall be comforted...They shall inherit the earth...They shall be satisfied” and so on. But the promise of the first and last beatitude in verses 3 and 10 seems to relate to the present: **the disciples are assured that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”**

Now, what is the meaning of this pattern? I think there are at least two implications.

- First, by sandwiching six promises in between two assurances that such people have the kingdom of heaven, I think Jesus means to tell us that these six promises are blessings of the kingdom. In other words, these six things are what you can count on when you are a part of God’s kingdom.

This is what the kingdom brings: comfort, earth ownership, satisfied righteousness, mercy, a vision of God, and the awesome title, son of God. You don't have to pick and choose among these promises. They all belong to the kingdom.

That is the first implication I see in the fact that Jesus begins with the assurance, "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven" and ends with the assurance, "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven" with six promises sandwiched in between.

- The other implication of this pattern comes from the fact that the first and last assurances are present tense, and the six in the middle are future. "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven" in verses 3 and 10 — but, "They shall be comforted. . . They shall inherit the earth" and so on in verses 4–9. I think this is Jesus's way of saying that, in some sense, the kingdom of heaven is present with the disciples now ("Theirs is the kingdom of heaven"), but that the full blessings of the kingdom will have to wait for the age to come ("They shall inherit the earth").

Another way to put it is that Jesus has brought the kingdom of heaven to earth in his own kingly power and fellowship, and we can enjoy foretastes of it here and now; but the full experience of the life of the kingdom will have to wait for the age to come.

Take several examples.

- Verse 4 says that those who mourn will one day be comforted. As Revelation 21:4 says, "[God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore." But look at verses 11–12, "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." In other words, even though the final reward of comfort is kept for us in heaven, we can now rejoice even in the midst of suffering. And is not this joy a foretaste of the promised comfort? There is no joy without some element of comfort.
- Or consider verse 7. It promises, "They shall receive mercy." But in the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:23–35, the king says to the wicked servant, "And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (Matthew 18:33). In other words, Jesus teaches that we do not merely wait for the age to come to receive mercy. It has come in Jesus. We taste it here and now in forgiveness of sins and innumerable blessings of this life.
- Or consider verse 9. It promises, "They shall be called sons of God." As Romans 8:23 says, "We . . . groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." So, the full benefits of being sons of God await the resurrection. But look at Matthew 5:16: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." God is already our Father! We are already sons! That is, we have a foretaste of sonship now.

The point of these three examples is that the kingdom of heaven is both present and future. We have foretastes of the reign of God now, but we will experience vastly more in the future. I think this is why verses 3 and 10 assure us that "theirs is the kingdom of heaven," but verses 4–9 promise that the kingdom blessings are still in the future. It is both.

Unless you see the Beatitudes as part of this biblical fabric, you will not be able to understand them for what they are. They are an announcement of how fortunate people are who already possess, as it were, the power of the kingdom. You might say, “Blessed! Blessed! And fortunate are you who have the kingdom power at work within you, for you will inherit the kingdom with all its infinite pleasures forever and ever.” The Beatitudes are announcements that people like this are very blessed — very fortunate.

But that is not all. The Beatitudes also contain an implicit invitation to become this kind of person. The disciples sit at Jesus’s feet and hear his words as congratulations. “Oh, how fortunate you are, my dear brothers! Oh, how fortunate you are to be chosen of God, to have your eyes opened, to be drawn to the Savior, to be poor and mourning and meek and hungry and merciful and pure and peaceable! Rejoice! Rejoice and give thanks, my beloved disciples, that you are this kind of person, for it is not your own doing! It is the reign of God in your life.” So, the disciples hear the Beatitudes as words of celebration about the work of God in their lives.

But what about the crowds standing behind the disciples? How do they hear these words of congratulations? How should they hear them, if they are not poor in spirit, if they are not mourning or meek or hungry for righteousness or merciful or pure or peaceable? What do these words mean for them? They are certainly not congratulations. You can’t congratulate a guest on his wedding garment if he doesn’t have it on (Matthew 22:11–14).

What then? If you see people being welcomed to a feast with a certain garment on, don’t the words of welcome stir you up to go get a garment like that? And if you see people being promised the blessings of eternal life because they are poor in spirit and mourning and meek and hungry for righteousness and merciful and pure and peaceable, don’t those words of promise beckon you to become that kind of person? Indeed, don’t they beget in you the seeds of those very flowers? Perhaps not. But for some, they do. And if they don’t in you, oh, how you should pray that God would not leave you in such a hard and impenitent condition.

So, the Beatitudes are words of celebration for disciples — people who have been awakened by the present power of the age to come. And they are words of invitation for the crowds — the people who come to worship out of tradition or curiosity or skepticism. And for some, they are words of transformation — by the power and mercy of God.