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Following Jesus through the Beatitudes

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Introduction

The Beatitudes: brief statements; simple words; and profound meanings.

These teachings of Jesus are primarily for His disciples, and constitute a charter for Kingdom living. Originally passed on within the early Christian community within an oral tradition, the Beatitudes were then recorded under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by Matthew and Luke. Yet, the same Holy Spirit inspired Matthew and Luke to record the Beatitudes differently.

The Concept of ‘Blessed’

In Hebrew, as in Greek, there are 2 words that are translated into English as ‘blessed.’

One of these Greek words is *eulogeo*, which parallels *beraka* in the Hebrew Scriptures. *Eulogeo* does not appear in the Beatitudes. This word is used in prayer when the worship leader asks God for some blessing that the individual or community is eager to receive from God. *Eulogeo* is the right word for ‘O Lord, bless the sick’ or ‘O Lord, bless the children.’

The other words for ‘blessed’ in the Hebrew is *asir* and in the Greek is *makarios*. These are word clusters that are not part of a wish list or used to invoke a blessing, but which recognize an existing state of happiness or good fortune. In essence, these words affirm a quality of spirituality that is already present. For instance, we might say, ‘Mrs XXX is a bless-ed person in our church.’ We are not asking for a blessing, but we are affirming a quality in Mrs XXX that already exists.

In the Beatitudes, the word used for ‘blessed’ is *makarios*. This makes a big difference in how we understand the Beatitudes. For instance, the 3rd Beatitude (‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth’) should not be understood to mean, ‘If you are meek, you will inherit the earth.’ As a group, the Beatitudes do not mean, ‘Blessed are the people who do XXX for they will receive YYY.’ The point is not exhortation for a certain type of behavior.

Instead, the Beatitudes should be read with the sense, ‘Look at the authentic spirituality and joy of those people who have or will be given X.’

Put in modern terms, we could say, ‘Bless-ed is the happy daughter of Mr. Jones because she will inherit the farm.’ The woman in question is already the happy daughter of Mr. Jones. She is not working to earn the farm. Everyone knows that a key element in her happy and secure life is that she and the community around her know that the farm will one day be hers. The first statement affirms a happy state that already exists, with no knowledge of when she will actually inherit the farm. The second statement affirms a future that allows her even now to live a happy life.

The distinctive feature of *makarios* is that it refers to the distinctive spiritual joy that comes to every man or woman or child from their share in the salvation in the Kingdom of God. Bless-ed refers to a spiritual condition of divinely gifted joy already present, not a requirement to be fulfilled in order to receive a reward.

Memorization of the Beatitudes

As Christians, we have the awesome privilege of knowing God's heart through the Bible. We are able to see God's power, His hatred towards sin and wickedness, and His grace all throughout the Scriptures.

Having this information does not automatically lead to the transformation that we are promised when we renew our mind. How are we to spur on the transformation that Christ brings? One way is through memorizing the Beatitudes in particular and the Scriptures in general.

Here are 10 Biblical Reasons for Memorizing Scripture:

1. Jesus did it. All throughout the Gospels Jesus quoted the Old Testament. He quotes from 24 different books roughly 180 times! It is clear that He thought of the Scriptures as the ultimate authority in life and a way to understand the heart and desires of God. Why would we not follow Jesus by knowing and trusting Scripture the way he did?

2. We are called to do it. Colossians 3:16 tells us to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 tells us to bind God's law on our foreheads, teach it to our children, talk about it wherever we go, and make it an integral part of our lives. We must know Scripture first before we can teach it or apply it as God desires.

3. It renews our mind and transforms our life. Are you one of those people who have to write everything down so that you don't forget? God knows that we cannot remember or keep his commands without being reminded of them. This is one reason he told us to renew our minds in the Scriptures daily. He already wrote down for us what we are to know.

Romans 12:2 says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Keeping the truth of Scripture fresh in our minds helps us in the transformational process that God desires.

4. It helps against temptation. In Jesus' time of temptation in the wilderness, He countered Satan's deceitful words with words of truth found in Scripture. Even though Jesus is Himself the Word of God, He used the written Word of God for battling temptation.

The Psalmist understood the Word's power in battling temptation, saying "I have stored up your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11).

The Armor of God, as mentioned in Ephesians 6:10-20, only mentions one offensive weapon, "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God." We are given the powerful offensive weapon to cut down untruths and tempting words, putting them to death with words of truth.

Knowing many Bible verses about temptation, the enemy, and the promises of God is exactly like wielding a powerful weapon during temptation. The Word has power!

How can we combat with the power of the Word if we don't have the Word in our heart and on our minds at all times? Do we ever feel like we are going to battle without any weapons? Fighting against temptation is just another reason for the study of Scripture and Scripture memorization.

5. It keeps your life pure, helping you live in obedience. "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word" (Psalm 119:9).

Knowing God's Word through the memorization of Bible verses is a great way to guard our lives and actions according to God's Word. It is a preventative method for avoiding temptation because when God's Word is fresh in your mind, we will more easily avoid temptation.

6. It helps us prosper and successful. This promise is shown in Joshua 1:8, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.”

It is vital to remember that God’s definition of being prosperous and successful is far different from the world’s definition. This is not a guarantee that we will automatically have health and wealth, but we are promised a spiritual blessing, which is so much greater.

Psalm 1 describes a man who delights in the law of the Lord by meditating on it. It goes on to say that he will prosper in all that he does and that he will be like a tree planted by streams of living water.

7. You can readily encourage believers with Scripture. Memorizing Scripture and knowing the Bible give believers a great opportunity to share it with other believers and encourage them to live in obedience, fight temptation, renew their minds, and conform more to the person of Christ.

Paul exhorts the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 4:18 to be ready to encourage other believers with the truth and 2 Timothy 3:16 says that all Scripture is useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. Knowing Scripture is a vital part of ministering to others.

8. You can share with unbelievers better. We are urged in 1 Peter 3:15 to always be ready to give a defense for our hope in Christ. We should memorize Scripture so we can walk unbelievers through the salvation message and help them understand their sin and need for a Savior. Speaking God’s Words instead of our own will give our message more authority and will harness the power that is in the Word of God (Isaiah 55:11, Hebrews 4:12, Jeremiah 23:29).

9. You gain a better understanding of God and his will. When we know God’s Word and obey it, we are able to experience more of God (John 14:21) and experience the freedom that comes only through obedience (John 8:31-32).

Knowing God comes with a greater knowledge of His will for us. Romans 12:2 says that when we renew our minds and are transformed, we will be able to, “discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” What Christian does not want a better understanding of God and His perfect will?

10. Fills your head with wisdom. The Bible is a book of tremendous wisdom that can have an impact on every area of our life. By memorizing the Scripture we are able to have that wisdom with us at all times. Luke 2:52 says that even Jesus grew in wisdom during His earthly life. Why should we not do the same?

Remember, information is not transformation. Our attitude in memorization should be prayerful and humble, seeking to examine our lives and gaze deeply into the character of God. If our thoughts, actions, and lives do not change after memorizing Scripture, we have done something wrong!

Here are 10 Suggestions on how to memorize Scripture:

1. Memorize the Word of God in community.

With a small group or with the larger congregation, memorizing scripture as a community is a powerful way to learn the Bible together through perusing mutual goals with accountability. Push each other to memorize and treasure the Word of God more.

This is one way to live out Proverbs 27:17, “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”

2. Memorize along with your family.

Memory verses are not just for kids!

3. Note Cards.

When you encounter a Bible verse you want to put to memory, make verse cards and place them in areas of your house or workplace that you will notice: on the bathroom mirror, in your living room, on your refrigerator, etc. Some people even memorize Scripture in the shower!

Making the desktop background of your computer something with scripture on it is another powerful way to always keep God's Word on your mind.

Deuteronomy 6:8-9 says we are to bind God's commands on our hands, on the doorposts of our houses and on our gates so that they are constantly reminding us of God and His commands. When we post verses all around our house we are able to more frequently meditate on God's word, which helps us renew our minds.

4. Listen to an audio Bible.

A good way to redeem the time is to listen to Scripture while in the car, at the gym, or cooking. This is ideal for memorizing longer passages of Scripture. This is a good way to delight yourself in the law of the Lord, as Psalm 1 teaches. Faith does come by hearing, right?

5. Pray.

God is the one who commands that we know Scripture and let it dwell in us, would He not answer a prayer to see his will done? Pray to God for help, pray to God for guidance, pray to God for understanding, pray to God for a deeper love for His Word.

Psalm 119:33, "Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end."

Psalm 119:35, "Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight."

John 16:13, "When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth."

Pray for illumination, God will answer!

6. Have a plan with goals.

Having good intentions without a proper plan is often a recipe for failure. To know the Bible better through scripture memorization, it is good to have a defined plan and goals. Make a list for yourself of verses or themes you want to memorize and then set a date you would like them memorized by. Some things never get done unless we plan out each step!

7. Find Software to help.

Scripture Memory? There are Apps for that! There are many websites and programs that can help you memorize Scriptures by providing plans and tools for your aid.

8. Put it to song.

The chances are that many of us know our ABC's because of the Alphabet song, or we know the major music scale (Do-Re-Mi...) because of The Sound of Music. Getting a song stuck in our head is another proof that music is a powerful tool to help memorization. That is why putting the Bible to song or listening to music filled with Biblical lyrics is a useful way to internalize the Word of God.

9. Always be on the lookout.

During your normal study of Scripture or while we are listening to a sermon, be on the lookout for good verses and passages to memorize, and write them down!

10. Read out loud / Write it out.

Reading out loud is a common tip on how to best memorize. It is one of the methods for memorization that works the best because it combines two learning styles (visual and auditory). Writing out the Scriptures is another great way to memorize verses because it targets two learning styles as well (visual and tactile).

Other Tips:

- Before you set to memorize a verse, go to the verse in context to make sure you know what it is actually saying.
- Don't forget to memorize the reference! This helps in your own personal study and while sharing with others.
- Think about how you can apply the verse to your life and then pray for God's help in applying it.
- Use it or lose it! If you don't keep Scripture fresh in your mind, it may be easy to lose! Plan to review what you memorize from time to time to keep God's Word fresh in your life.

The Beatitudes in Luke 6.20-26 (Jesus as the heart of the Christian's life)

- | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God. | BLESSED - POOR
For - Kingdom |
| 2. Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled. | BLESSED - HUNGRY
For - satisfied |
| 3. Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh. | BLESSED - WEEPING
For - laugh |
| 4. Blessed are you when people hate you,
and when they exclude you,
revile you,
and defame you
on account of the Son of Man.
Rejoice in that day
and leap for joy,
for surely your reward is great in heaven;
for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. | BLESSED - HATED
-
-
-
Son of Man
+
+
+
For – so the prophets |
| 5. But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation. | WOE - RICH
For – received reward |
| 6. Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry. | WOE - FULL
For - hunger |
| 7. Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep. | WOE - LAUGHING
For - weeping |
| 8. Woe to you when all speak well of you,
for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. | WOE - RESPECTED
For – so false prophets |

Luke records 4 positive Beatitudes that are balanced with 4 negative Beatitudes. The last four couplets are the reverse of the first four. The fourth couplet contains extra material.

These Lucan Beatitudes affirm that whilst it is unbiblical to assume that when things are going badly there is a problem with our relationship with God, it is spiritually dangerous to assume that when life seems to be going well that our relationship with God is strong.

The climax of the Lucan Beatitudes is at the heart of the 4th Beatitude, which contains the only christological reference. Jesus Christ is to be at the heart and center of the Christian life and experience.

The Beatitudes in Matthew 5.3-12 (Jesus as the focus of the Christian's life)

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
2. Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
3. Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
5. Blessed are the merciful,
for they will receive mercy.
6. Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
7. Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.
8. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
9. Blessed are you when people revile you
and persecute you
and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely
on my account. Jesus
Rejoice and be glad,
for your reward is great in heaven,
for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. +

Unlike Luke, Matthew has no balancing negatives. For Matthew, Jesus is the climax, focus and culmination of the Christian walk ('...on my account.') Each of the 9 couplets opens with a person to whom Jesus give the title "Blessed" and in each case the matching condition follows in the second line. For both Matthew and Luke, additional information is presented in the teachings on persecution. In both accounts, the persecution couplet begins with negatives, focuses on Jesus Himself, and then concludes with balancing positives.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What does my life revolve around? Is Jesus Christ really at the center of my life?
2. What is the focus of my life, that which I look for and long for? Is being like Jesus Christ today and meeting Him tomorrow the focus of my life?
3. How does my relationship with Jesus Christ affect my stated of happiness or 'blessedness' today? Can I be blessed today if Jesus Christ is not both the center and focus of my life?
4. What invitation is Jesus making to me in the Beatitudes? (c.f. Matthew 11.28-30).

Beatitude I
Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
(I need help – I can't do it alone!)

Whereas Luke records, 'Blessed are the poor...' Matthew records, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit....' Does this indicate that the poor per se are blessed by God, and that Matthew had 'sold out' within a wealthier early Christian community?

Absolutely not! In fact, the 'poor in spirit' is a profound expression of Kingdom living. Why?

Firstly, in the Gospels we find that poverty is neither a hindrance nor condition for salvation. Poverty is never idealized, nor is it sanctioned as an ideal spiritual condition. Matthew does not say that you can be poor in body but rich in spirit. Nor does he say that you can be rich externally but be poor in spirit. Furthermore, we cannot take a 'poor now – rich later' message from this Beatitude.

Rather, Matthew presents a God who lacks nothing. In Ex. 3.7-8, we find that God's goodness is revealed in the elimination of those conditions that reflect poverty and need. Poverty and all the silent suffering it represents therefore represents a denial of goodness and perfection of God.

Secondly, salvation comes to those who are poor in spirit. But what does this mean exactly? In Isa. 66.2, we read where God describes the worship acceptable to Him, 'But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble / poor and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word.' Isaiah rarely uses the word 'poor' to reflect those who have insufficient to eat (e.g. Isa. 58.7), but in the majority of cases in which he uses the word 'poor' he describes those who are humble enough to know that they need God's grace and who 'tremble' at His word.

Essentially, the Kingdom of God cannot be received by full hands. Jesus is warning us against a) worldly self-sufficiency, i.e. the absence of physical need, for then we trust ourselves and our physical resources and no longer trust God for our daily bread and life, and b) religious self-sufficiency, i.e. we trust our religious parents, Christian education, praying grandmothers, terminal degrees, church membership, good deeds, understanding of doctrine, upright and seemingly moral lives for our right-standing before God....and don't need Jesus.

Thirdly, the 'poor in spirit' already dwell within the Kingdom of God. What is this Kingdom? It is the rule of God in the lives of individuals and communities. In the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6.10) Jesus affirms the future manifestation of the Kingdom of Glory, but in Lk. 11.20 He affirms the present presence of the Kingdom in our very midst. The 'poor in spirit' live in the interim between the inauguration of the Kingdom at the 1st Coming and the full manifestation of the Kingdom at the 2nd Coming.

What are the implications of this Beatitude?

Firstly, poverty is a sign that God's plan for humanity is not being fulfilled. According to Matt. 11.2-6, the poor are to have 'good news' brought to them. Only well-fed Christians would assume that food would not be a tangible manifestation of the 'good news' of the Kingdom of God to chronically hungry Christians. The teaching of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25.31-46) indicates that any future share in the Kingdom is equated with our efforts today to alleviate various forms of poverty and suffering. Therefore, if the proclamation of the 'good news' of the Kingdom of God is to have any impact today, it must be nurtured by people striving to reflect God's perfection (Matt. 5.48) in a way that works to reverse the conditions and impact of poverty (Matt. 19.21).

Secondly, if the 'poor in spirit' are already in the Kingdom, then a proud spirit is a *skandalon*, a cause of stumbling, that which will keep a person out of the Kingdom. The 'poor in spirit' acknowledge God as the ultimate source of power, life and meaning, and so they reorder their personal, communal and collective lives on behalf of the poor (Matt. 13.44-46). With this pearl of great price, they part from those things that offer false security. There is an emptying of self-sufficiency or trust in any life foundation other than God.

Thus, there is to be a 'letting go' and 'letting God,' i.e. a following of Jesus who also 'emptied Himself' (Phil. 2.5-7). Jesus lived as one of the 'poor in spirit' for He is the *pais*, the 'servant of God' (Matt. 12.18) of Isa. 6.7, 11.2, 42.1, 53.4, 61.1 who 'emptied Himself' and who allowed God's Spirit to pervade His being and guide His steps.

Thirdly, the 'poor in spirit' live today by the principles of the Kingdom of God. In practical terms, the 'poor in spirit' strive for justice, peace, righteousness. Those who are 'poor in spirit' cannot sit idly by whilst injustices are perpetrated, conflicts are encouraged, and righteousness is trampled upon. The empty hands receiving God's salvation are not made lame! They are strengthened and filled to serve the neighbor, to meet his need for bread, health, social security and justice (1 John 3.16).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Do I come before God with truly empty hands? Is there any aspect of my life or experience that I am consciously or unconsciously relying on to commend myself to God? How do I respond to John 6.37 and Matt. 11.28-30?
2. How do I respond emotionally to those caught in poverty? How do I respond intellectually to those caught in poverty? How do those in the Kingdom of God respond to those caught in poverty?
3. In whose kingdom am I living today? My own? That of the Prince of this World? Or that of God? Beyond my profession of faith, which kingdom's values does my practical life truly reflect?
4. What promise or invitation is Jesus giving me in this Beatitude?

Practical Illustration

An individual has their hands filled with boxes / suitcases. When their hands are completely full, they are asked to hold an object of incredible value. They can't. Full hands, hearts full of self-sufficiency, cannot receive God's grace. In emptying our hands, or recognizing our desperate need of God, we come to view others differently. With full hands, the temptation is to look down on those with half-full hands, but with empty hands we view others as being the same as us – in desperate need of God's grace.

Beatitude II
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted
(I'm really hurting – but I'm gonna bounce back!)

As each conflict in the Middle-East unfolds, we have become used to the sight of people beating their breast, tearing their clothes and even gashing themselves. This is mourning today as it was in the time of Jesus. This Beatitude touches deeply the reality of suffering and death in all its various forms. As such, it touches the human experience like no other, and thus it represents the fulfillment of more of humanity's hopes than any other Beatitude. What does this Beatitude teach us?

Firstly, Hollywood is built on our fallen desires that seem to enjoy watching the suffering of others. Blockbusters are built on the assumption that **people pay to watch others suffering**. Nothing could be further from being like Jesus! At the other extreme, our society is full of social cushions (pain pills, dieting fads, exercise fads etc.) that promise to reduce suffering. Eat all you like, never exercise, act unwisely...yet take this pill and all will be OK. This Beatitude has nothing to do with these fallen attitudes. There is mourning....because there is suffering....and we were never created for suffering. Yet through the 'divine passive' Jesus reveals there is a God, that He is a God who actively comforts, and that He is comforting me in my distress today.

Secondly, suffering is an extraordinary teacher. Suffering can open the door to profound wisdom. We know little about the depths of the human spirit until we have endured suffering. Pain rearranges our priorities. To become a refugee is horrible, but refugees quickly learn that what really matters is life itself, and that possessions – at the end of the day – are worthless. Great natural disasters strike our world, e.g. tsunamis, hurricanes and earthquakes. As a broad generalization, there is a striking difference between those who stay and those who left. The returnees see only devastation and feel only anguish and loss. Those who remained and survived are often full of gratitude....for being alive.

Thirdly, healing of human brokenness and alienation in all its dimensions was and is at the heart of Jesus' ministry. Since sin was popularly believed to be the cause of suffering, Jesus' authority over sin was manifest in His healing power. Jesus, 'Took our infirmities and bore our diseases' (Matt. 8.17). Jesus is the only One able to heal all our causes for mourning, including alienation from ourselves, others and God.

In Matthew, there are 3 layers of infirmities and diseases: Firstly, sickness, *nosos* (4.23-24; 8.17, 9.35, 10.1). A problem of the body. Where does it hurt? Secondly, illness, *kakos*, (21.41, 24.48). A problem of communal relationships. Who is to blame? Thirdly, infirmity, *malakia* (4.23, 9.35, 10.1). A problem of the exclusion of 'social lepers.' How does it affect society? Jesus responds to sickness by curing (*therapeuein*), i.e. the symptoms are gone. He responds to illness with healing (*therapeuein*), i.e. being made well. He also responds to infirmity by cleansing (*katharizein*), i.e. being restored to well being in society. Only Jesus can comfort those who mourn under the impact of all forms of alienation.

What are the implications of this Beatitude?

Firstly, whilst we live in an entertainment-oriented society, excessive entertainment only leads to boredom and an ultimate sense of meaninglessness, whereas suffering reveals a depth of meaning we may never otherwise achieve. If in our entertainment we revel in the sufferings of others, not only are we fostering meaninglessness within ourselves, but we are separating ourselves from Jesus, who never looked on suffering humanity with anything other than compassion. This hard-heartedness to the sufferings of others means that we close ourselves to God's comfort and being blessed today.

The righteous mourn over injustice and do not succumb to compassion fatigue. In turning a blind eye, looking the other way, switching channels to a less distressing scene, avoiding unpleasant topics, pretending my neighbor is not suffering....all these decisions serve to close us to God's blessing and comfort. The more I focus on my own need for comfort and ignore those who mourn around me, the more I close myself to God. In actively bringing comfort to those who mourn, we open ourselves to God's comfort and blessedness for ourselves.

Secondly, the one who is lashed by the storm is often the one who is most grateful to God. Whilst we are not to seek suffering, because we tend to grow the most spiritually during the most difficult moments of our lives, suffering becomes an opportunity for humbling ourselves before God and seeking His face and receiving His comfort (2 Chron. 7.14).

Thirdly, the righteous mourn over their own sin, and are comforted through God's forgiveness. In embracing the world's brokenness and mourning (Matt. 8.17), Jesus is able to cure all who are still under the authority of alienation (Matt. 8.16). This salvation from sin in all its forms opens the possibility for all people to be restored to the original image of God. Jesus is inviting us to reflect on our personal brokenness, including that sense of separation from God that comes to us when we admit our own sin and selfishness.

With David (Ps. 51), we admit that our innermost sin does not refer to external actions, but to those parts of our lives and hearts where we have yet to allow God to rule, where the Kingdom of Self rather than the Kingdom of God is supreme. As we withhold parts of our innermost beings from God, we find we are alienated from God, and unable to receive the full wonder of His comfort and blessedness. Unless we open our hearts (*kardia*) to God (Matt. 15.19), our fallen hearts will be at the center of our lives. If God is not the treasure of my heart (Matt. 7.21), to that innermost degree I will be alienated from God. Thus, to mourn for our own alienation, and at the suffering of others, requires a new heart. Without this new heart I cannot experience the blessedness and comfort that God wishes for me. David's prayer of Ps. 51 is thus our prayer.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. In the Gospels, we find that the ministry of Jesus was built on Isa. 61.1-3 (Lk. 4.16-21). If we interpret Isa. 61.1-3 through the lens of this Beatitude, this is what we find:

Mourning	Comfort
Oppression Brokenhearted Captive Prisoner Faint spirit Ashes Mourning Personal experience of mourning	Good news Binding-up Liberty Release Mantle of praise Provide a garland Oil of gladness and comfort Personal experience of comfort

Task: recall times when you have experienced mourning personally or amongst those close to you. Reflect on those situations, and share words, feelings or behaviors that describe what it means 'to mourn.' Fill the above column under 'Personal experience with mourning' with these words.

Now recall times when you have personally experienced comfort. List the emotions, rituals and behavior that were a manifestation of this comfort. Fill the above column under 'Personal experience with comfort' with these words.

1. Is there a form of comfort for all types of mourning?
2. How may I be an instrument of God's comfort for those who are mourning?
3. Who today do I know who needs me to be an instrument of God's comfort?

Practical Illustration

Pass an unidentified can around. Nobody knows what is inside. Empty it into a large bowl. The bowl represents God, to whom we can unburden our hearts. He is big enough, confidential, always able to carry what we bear. In giving our grief to God, the inner struggles can be given to Him and we create space for Him to fill us with joy, love, peace and the other fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Beatitude III
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth
(I'm gonna remain cool, calm and corrected!)

In our world, meekness is not celebrated. The meek are often considered to be weak and to be doormats. They are viewed as timid, submissive, easily dominated and submissive. When Charles Keating headed Lincoln Savings and Loan, he sent an in-house memo that said, 'Remember, the weak, the meek and the ignorant are always good targets.' He was later jailed for his role in the savings and loan scandal of the 1980s – 1990s.

So, what was Jesus actually talking about? The Greek word 'land' (*ge*) mirrors the Hebrew *erez*. In general, these words refer to land in general, the land of promise, the inhabited earth, and the earth as the theater of history. Here Jesus is quoting from Ps. 37, which reads, 'But those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land....But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity....The righteous shall inherit the land, and live in it forever' (Ps. 37.9, 11, 29).

Ps. 37 contrasts 2 ways to live in the land: through violence or meekness. Seeking security in excessive desire for power, material possessions and honor results in various forms of worry and envy (Ps. 37.1), anxiety (Ps. 37.7), anger and wrath (Ps. 37.8, 12). This false security leads to evildoing as a way of protecting our position as individuals, groups or nations. The psalmist warns against making such land-based attitudes the foundation of our lives. Rather, we are urged to, 'Trust in the Lord, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security' (Ps. 37.3).

Scripturally speaking, 'earth' and 'land' are synonymous. However, in Jesus' day and our day these concepts are very different. How so? Ps. 24.1 says, 'The earth is the LORD's, and the fullness thereof,' i.e. the earth and all within it belong ultimately to God. However, the Israelites had come to distinguish between the 'earth' belonging to God, but the 'land' belonging to them. This is also a modern phenomenon. Yes, the earth is God's, but this bit of land is mine!

When the land is mine and not yours, it must be defended....thus the inherent potential for land-based violence. And when land-based value systems operate in parallel to concepts of personal honor or national prestige, national leaders are all too ready to make war because a loss of land, no matter how insignificant, is viewed as a loss of national honor. Within societies, violence is often initiated by one group in society against another (e.g. apartheid, ethnic cleansing, policies that lead to social exclusion or discrimination, regressive taxation) when one group is threatened by the potential loss of land (and the financial wealth, production capacity and social prestige that comes with it). At national levels, this underlying philosophy / lack of trust in God for our basic security serves as a justification for pre-emptive strikes.

In Jesus' day, the lands of Samaria, Judea and Galilee were occupied by men of military might: the Romans. They were opposed by Zealots, Jewish nationalists who used guerilla tactics to try and liberate the nation from the Roman yoke. Alternatively, the Pharisees insisted that the land was the Jews' by virtue of descent from Abraham. Jesus denies however that the land will be divided according to biological descent or military might. Rather, it will go to the meek. The meek are blessed today simply because their lives are built around trust in God. He will take care of them. Their basic needs will be met. As such, they are not consumed by the fear of loss which dominates the lives of the wealthy and powerful.

What are the implications of this Beatitude?

Firstly, we own nothing of ourselves. Once we get into the land of the condo, the job, the position, the neighborhood, the terminal degree, the 2nd or 3rd cars, the honor and the tenure, it is easy to forget that it was God, not ourselves, who brought us to this point in our lives. The land is always inherited. It is not taken. It is not ours to take, but God's to give. Thus we have no absolute right over it. Our inheritance of any land demands fidelity to God's vision for how we are to live in the land (Deut. 6.10-12).

And as stewards rather than absolute owners, we represent God to His creation. Deut. 8.6-10 tells us that God would provide His people all the fundamental resources for life....for everyone. God promised all the resources His people would need, if only they would order their physical and spiritual households according to God's will. Why is it important to hear this? Because when 'the land' rather than God's will becomes our 'bottom line,' and we forget it is an inheritance from God, we become self-delusional in our false pride, and separate ourselves from God. The pursuit of land becomes an

end in itself. The pursuit of wealth takes precedence over seeking God's reign. The ordering of the house (*oikos*, *oikonomia*) or the economy or the household of faith is ordered to give more to those who already have, and to penalize the poor and marginalized. And operating from pride, we are no longer counted amongst the meek.

Secondly, the meek work to ensure that all those in need have their basic needs met. The meek are those who challenge physical or social violence perpetrated on minority or marginalized groups. The meek cannot support any structures or systems whose stewardship of the earth's resources denies the basics of life to the poor and the voiceless. The meek ask themselves if they really have a right to what the poor may need. The meek are invited, as was the rich young ruler, to use their resources sacrificially on behalf of the poor. Whilst governments have social security systems, this does not remove the responsibility and privilege of the meek to share on a personal level with those who have not and work peacefully for the reform of disenfranchising systems.

And thirdly, Jesus described Himself as 'meek' ('ὅτι πραῦς εἰμι καὶ ταπεινὸς τῇ καρδίᾳ', 'For I am meek and humble of heart' Matt. 11.29). To be like Jesus, we are also to seek meekness for ourselves. When we come to Jesus and accept His yoke rather than the yokes of imperial power or ecclesiastical infallibility or land-based values or continual worry over loss, He promises we will find rest for our souls, i.e. freedom from the nagging fear of loss, and rest in the bountiful provision of God for all our needs. This rest (*anapausis*) is the same rest that eluded the dove sent from the ark (Gen. 8.9), is the same rest that the promised land offered the wandering Israelites (Gen. 49.15), and is the same rest that Naomi wished for her 2 daughters-in-law (Ruth 1.9, 3.1).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. 'The earth is the Lord's – but this bit of land is mine. Keep off! Go away! Survive somewhere else!' How does my life exhibit this attitude?
2. In what ways do I manage my time, physical and spiritual gifts as personal assets? In what way do I manage them as gifts entrusted to me by God for building up His people?
3. In what ways do I, or my family, or our church family, participate in social structures that marginalize and exclude the poor and voiceless?
4. What is the responsibility of the meek to the proud? How may the meek minister to the proud?
5. How is the meekness and non-violence of Jesus appealing to me today?

Practical Illustration

Standing on a stone – a firm foundation. Standing on sand however forces me to press everything down around me in order to push myself up. Firm in Christ, we need not push others down. Without Christ, life is a constant experience of pushing down others around me in order to get ahead, or even just to survive.

Beatitude IV
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled
(I really want to do the right thing!)

To talk about those who, ‘Hunger and thirst after righteousness’ is to use words rooted in physical needs to describe spiritual realities. In the developed world, serious sustained thirst is almost non-existent, whilst the majority is satisfied with food. In the developing world, and at the time of Jesus, hunger and thirst were daily realities. Just as satisfying hunger and thirst was an all-consuming daily concern, so our hunger and thirst for righteousness is to be an all-consuming and daily concern.

It is important to note that Jesus did not say, ‘Bless-ed is those who live righteously and maintain a righteous lifestyle.’ Rather, He affirms the dynamic nature of an ongoing seeking for righteousness. The bless-ed are not those who **arrive** but those who **continue** in their search for greater righteousness. In the Parable of the Pearl (Matt. 13.45-46), the Kingdom of God is not represented by the pearl, but by the merchant who is seeking for the pearl, i.e. the believers who hunger and thirst after righteousness are called bless-ed in their striving.

But what is this righteousness (*dikaosune*) we are to strive for? Whereas this word is not used in Mark, and only once in Luke, it appears 7 times in Matthew (3.15; 5.6, 10, 20; 6.1, 31; 21.23), a number related to perfection. The Hebrew (*tsedaqa*) and the Greek (*dikaosune*) are packed with meaning, but the essential idea is that they do not refer to an absolute behavioral or ethical norm, but they denote relationship. Every underlying relationship makes claims on visible conduct, and the satisfaction of these claims within the context of relationship is described as *tsedaqa*. We will now examine 4 key aspects of righteousness:

Firstly, righteousness often refers to the mighty acts of God to save, and this *tsedaqa* is always a gift of God, e.g. Micah 6.3-5. In this text, God recalls his past mighty acts in history and invites His people to remember all he has done for them.

Secondly, righteousness has to do with being, ‘declared righteousness’ or vindicated. Righteousness and vindication are linked by Isaiah, ‘But my steadfast love will not depart from you, and my covenant of peace will not be removed....In righteousness (*tsedaqa*) you shall be established....This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their vindication (*tsedaqa*) from me, says the LORD (Isa. 54.10, 14, 17). This Beatitude refers to those who long for a renewed and renewing relationship with God. If then God acts in righteousness to grant His people a new status, how must they respond? As noted above, every relationship has claims on conduct....

Thirdly, the concepts of righteousness and justice overlap in Scripture. Justice / righteousness does not consist in ‘giving every man his due’ but includes showing mercy and compassion to the outcast, the oppressed, the weak, the orphan and the widow, as exemplified in Job 29.14-16. Isa. 42.3 outlines what constitutes Messianic justice, ‘A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not quench; He will faithfully bring forth justice.’ Messianic justice involves not an ‘eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ but compassionate acts on behalf of the broken and the exhausted. How are God’s people to respond to this concept of righteousness? Micah 6.6-9 provides the clear answer. Does God want burned offerings, thousands of rams, ten thousands of rivers of oil or even the sacrifice of our firstborn children? No! Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness are to, ‘Do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.’

Finally, righteousness is connected to peace. Isa. 32.17-20 reveals that where righteousness and peace are maintained, even the animals experience freedom.

What are the implications of this Beatitude?

Firstly, Jesus discusses a new form of lived and expressed righteousness throughout the Sermon on the Mount that challenges all believers:

1. A new way of dealing with those from whom we are alienated: reconciliation (Matt. 5.21-26).
2. A new way of relating sexually to others: non-manipulative (Matt. 5.27-30).
3. A new way of honoring the dignity of women: non-exploitative (Matt. 5.31-32).
4. A new code of honor: your word itself (Matt. 5.33-37).

5. A new way of dealing with abuse and evil-doing: disarmament (5.38-42).
6. A new model of reciprocity: treating everyone as a member of your own family (5.43-47).

Secondly, this Beatitude concludes, 'For they shall be satisfied.' This is another case of the 'divine passive,' i.e. God will satisfy them. For many believers today this is a strange concept. Popularly understood righteousness is no more than acceptance to an ethical norm. The person who keeps the law, follows the accepted standards of the community (e.g. the 'Adventist lifestyle') and has an admirable personal life will be respected and thereby satisfied by the community.

But if righteousness describes a relationship granted as a gift from God that brings peace, then only God can satisfy the longing for that righteousness and the approval or disapproval of the community is of secondary concern only. We are not righteous to please our peers but to show gratitude to God and to maintain our relationship with Him.

And finally, everyone who wants to lose weight struggles to curb urges for food and drink. Among the blessed of God, urges for righteousness are equally as powerful yet need not be restricted. They can be indulged! And they are satisfied daily by our gracious God.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do I understand 'righteousness'? Is it an absolute standard of behavior, a loving, obedient and faithful response to a gracious God, or somewhere in-between?
2. How does the 'Adventist lifestyle' fit into this understanding of righteousness? To what extent is the 'Adventist lifestyle' static or focused on self, and to what extent is it dynamic or focused serving our neighbor and those in need? Where should the focus be?
3. Am I already satisfied with God? Have I already had my fill? Am I a spiritual Laodicean? What is my true state before God?
4. How may I hunger, thirst and live for the new way of righteousness that Jesus reveals in the Sermon on the Mount?

Practical Illustration

Show a bruised reed and a burnt wick. These are practical illustrations of Isa. 42.3. Retributive justice says that if you hurt me, I will hurt you back, i.e. an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Messianic justice however recognizes that those who hurt us are struggling with the imprint of 6,000 years of sin, and like the reed are broken, and like the wick are spiritually exhausted. Messianic justice therefore responds to those who hurt us with loving acts of compassion. Joseph was a 'righteous man' and he responded to the social shame that Mary's pregnancy brought upon him by acting according to Messianic justice – he had compassion on her and as a result the Messiah literally came into his home.

Beatitude V
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy
(I'm gonna treat others the way I want them to treat me!)

A paradox of human nature is that we tend to seek justice for those who have offended us, but mercy from those whom we have offended.

Yet, in the LXX (Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT that was used at the time of Jesus and the apostles), we find the concepts of justice and mercy to be intimately linked. The Hebrew lists 115 instances of *tsedeq* (justice), 158 instances of *tsedaqah* (almsgiving) and 208 of the adjective *tsadiq* (just). The LXX translates *tsedeq* as *dikaosune* (justice), *tsedaqah* as *eleos* or *eleemosune* (mercy), and *tsadiq* as *dikaos* (just). Though frequently used in the LXX, the word *eleemon*, or merciful, occurs only once in the Gospels – here in Matt. 5.7.

Whilst the Pharisees operated with a retributive concept of justice, which often hurt individuals, Jesus' argued that mercy fulfills justice (Matt. 9.13, 12.7), and so allowed justice to become a liberating and dignifying force. In Lev. 19.1-2, God called His people to holiness ('The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: you shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy"). In a sincere effort to be faithful, the leaders of Israel developed a very detailed list of physical requirements for such holiness. By the time of Jesus, holiness was equated with purity, purity with cleanness, and cleanness with separation from that or those who were understood to be 'unclean.' Yet, the Good News of Jesus introduced another notion of holiness: mercy. In the Gospel, the politics of purity were replaced by the politics of compassion, and this led to constant conflict with the religious authorities.

We see in the ministry of Jesus that being merciful involves responding to human need with compassion at action (Matt. 9.36; 14.14; 18.27; Mk. 1.41; 6.34; Lk. 7.13; 10.33). Yet, mercy and being merciful presents a paradox for modern believers. Why is this so?

Firstly, do we forgive others as God forgives us? The Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6.9-13) asks that God, 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those that sin against us.' It sounds as if the 2 forms of forgiveness are parallel.

Secondly, do we forgive others in order that God will then forgive us? The Lord's Prayer in Lk. 11.4 reads, 'Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.' This reading of the Lord's Prayer affirms that we must forgive others before we can approach God seeking forgiveness for ourselves.

Thirdly, does God forgive us and then we are able to forgive others? The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt. 18.23-35) tells of a servant who was first forgiven a huge debt by his master, only to subsequently refuse to forgive a fellow servant a small sum. For this failure, he was then condemned by his master. As 1 John 4.19 affirms, 'We love, because He first loved us.'

Which of these 3 patterns of forgiveness best explains this Beatitude? Or should we choose all 3 patterns? In the ever-changing challenges of striving to be faithful, all 3 mysteriously make sense. Is this logical? Probably not! However, whoever claimed that from a human perspective mercy and forgiveness were logical anyway? To show mercy or to forgive can be extremely difficult...but the alternative is spiritual and physical self-destruction through the nursing of grudges or seeking of revenge. Such grievances are often passed from generation to generation, and become a destructive force in the lives of individuals and societies, e.g. vendettas.

The Gospel teaches us that the bless-ed escape these self-crippling cycles, for they are merciful.

What are the implications of this Beatitude?

Firstly, Jesus deliberately modeled mercy to the social outsiders of His day, e.g. the tax collectors & sinners (Matt. 9.9-13), Canaanites (Matt. 15.21), lepers (Matt. 8.1-4); women (Matt. 26.6-13); the diseased & dead (Matt. 9.18-26). His mercy was not an abstract concept, but involved a personal reaching out that drew these previously excluded individuals into the Kingdom of God.

Secondly, like the Pharisees of old, many modern-day disciples are adept at drawing circles to define the ‘Kingdom insiders’ and ‘Kingdom outsiders.’ Modern disciples have many definitions of ‘Contemporary Canaanites.’ Many modern-day disciples avoid all contact with ‘outsiders’ to avoid some sort of contamination....yet how are these outsiders to be warmly invited and led into the Kingdom if the ‘Kingdom insiders’ are focused on internal purity of standards, lifestyle and avoidance of outsiders?

Yet, the dynamic of active mercy is a *sine non qua* for those in the Kingdom of God. Mercy is non-negotiable, yet it is often prized amongst believers than holding to absolute (and often arbitrary) standards of righteousness and right-living. Refusal to show mercy to others, or to work to show mercy to others, excludes disciples from the Kingdom of God (Matt. 6.14-15). God’s people are to be known as merciful people, for they reflect the image of God, whose character is intrinsically merciful (Ex. 34.6-7).

And finally, offering forgiveness and mercy draws us into a circle of care, i.e. pre-empting the need for future forgiveness. When we forgive from the heart, we recognize the various forms of personal and institutional helplessness and deprivation around us and allow ourselves to be moved by compassion. This compassion in the Christian community is tangible: it involves release from debts, be they personal, communal or economic (c.f. Matt. 6.12-15). For some individuals, this involves reconciliation. For some groups it demands active conflict resolution. For some nations it demands the forgiveness of debts that prevent other nations being free. Whatever the debt forgiveness, Matthew’s house churches were to be a living witness to the transforming power of the Gospel (c.f. Matt. 11.2-6). This life-principle proclaims in a meaningful way the year of God’s favor and care to the world (Isa. 61.2).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do I relate to the 3 dynamics of forgiveness listed above?
2. In what ways do I tend to focus on justice or mercy in my relationships with others? How does this impact those closest to me? How does this impact me spiritually, physically and emotionally?
3. Whom is God calling me to be merciful today? How may I go about showing that individual / group mercy? What miracle does God need to work in my heart that I may offer mercy and forgiveness to the other person / group?
4. Who are modern-day Canaanites? How would I describe my personal attitude and actions to these ‘outsider groups’? How do my personal attitudes and actions reflect the actions and attitudes of Jesus to the Canaanites and outsiders of His day?

Practical Illustration

Ask an individual to drink a small amount of very salty water. This is unforgiveness – it is like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies. Then ask the individual to drink a full cup of pure grape juice. This is like forgiveness – it washes away the bitterness of unforgiveness, and brings a sense of wholeness that was not present before.

Beatitude VI
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God
(I've got to let the faith flow freely through me!)

A puzzling Beatitude. What did Jesus mean, 'For they will see God'? Who are the 'Pure in heart'? Jesus is affirming the words of the psalmist who links the experience of seeing God's face with purity of heart and righteous deeds.

Who can ascend the hill of the Lord?
And who shall stand in His holy place?
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
Who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
And do not swear deceitfully.
They will receive blessing from the Lord,
And vindication from the God of their salvation.
Such is the company of those who seek Him,
Who seek the face of the God of Jacob (Ps. 24.3-6).

The rabbis of Jesus' time focused on external purity and cleanness. The Mishnah includes an entire division on the topic entitled '*Tohoroth*' (cleanness) that includes nearly 200 pages and 11 tractates, covering such topics as vessels, tents, immersion pools and hands...but not hearts. There are 3 levels of cleanness discussed, and hands were always on the 2nd or 3rd level. In this case, Jesus is not critical per se of the laws on ceremonial cleanness, but He places His entire emphasis on the purity of the heart.

In Hebrew thought, the heart was not just one's feelings, but constituted the entire reality of one's inner life, including thoughts, emotions and will. To be 'pure in heart' means to be so undivided internally from God and His will that one manifests a profound transparency in all one's dealings with others.

Jesus connects 'seeing' with the 'heart' repeatedly in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matt. 6.22-23, Jesus says our 'eye' is either good / sound / simple or evil / unsound / divided. The just in Matthew are those who are poor in spirit, who listen to God's word, and who obey God's will. The wicked / evil are those who do not obey God's will in their works. In Matt. 5.28, one who *looks* lustfully on a woman has committed adultery in his *heart*. How can we know where our hearts really are? We gain insight by reflecting on our actions to others in need, and the importance of worldly wealth to us, 'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Matt. 6.21).

Yet, as we 'Ascend the hill of the Lord,' or as we seek to draw closer to God, Jesus outlines in the Sermon on the Mount various looks of the eye / heart which can be causes of stumbling that prevent us reaching the summit and seeing God:

Firstly, the occupied look / heart. This eye is not focused on God, but on the cares and anxieties of life (Matt. 6.25-31). This eye represents the seed down amongst thorns and thistles, which choke out the life of the seed (Matt. 13.22).

Secondly, the lustful look / heart. This eye is not focused on God, but on self-gratification in its many forms. 'For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander' (Matt. 15.19).

Thirdly, the ideal look / heart. This eye is not focused on God, but on an idealized self-image that is driven by comparison of our status, prestige and wealth with that of others. This is often manifest in a critical spirit that pushes others down to elevate ourselves (Matt. 7.1-5), and in rigid rules of 'should not / should, cannot / can, ought not / ought to.'

Finally, the resentful look / heart. This eye is not focused on God, but is a view that is stained by resentment or bitterness. Jesus describes this outlook in Matt. 5.21-22. Always willing to unmask the inner attitudes that indicated alienation from God, Jesus was unwilling to live by a law that merely rejected murder: he wanted to cleanse all attitudes of the heart that could lead to such violence.

What are the implications of this Beatitude?

Firstly, the human heart is deceitful above all else. All the ways of a man seem right unto Him, yet the end thereof is destruction. When we reflect on the motives behind our actions, if we are honest we come to the conclusion that we cannot know ourselves. We are confusing even to ourselves. We have motives we like, and motives we suspect exist but pretend to ignore. There is no human cure or treatment available. Rather, we are called to pray with the psalmist, 'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me....the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise....Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting' (Ps. 51.10, 17; 139.23-24). A recognition of our inability to know ourselves precedes our opening of our hearts to God to perform divine 'heart surgery.'

Secondly, we may all see God all around us, if we choose to! Ps. 19.1-4 reveals that nature itself reveals God and His character. We may see God in the words and actions of fellow believers....if we are looking for God and not looking to criticize them! Open our eyes Lord that we might see you....

And finally, do we actually want to see God? For many, their relationship with God is like a long-distance relationship. And all long-distance relationships have their ups and downs. A lack of joy in our relationship today indicates a lack of anticipation of meeting our distant friend. Whereas eager anticipation to meet our friend is translated into joy in the relationship today. We are thus called to ponder our relationship with Jesus. If we do not find joy with Him today, we will not look forward to His return, we will not work for His return, and His other disciples will be of little concern to us. However, if we are eagerly awaiting the moment when we see Him face to face, we will work for His return, and His other disciples will be profoundly important to us.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Reflect on the spiritual condition of those the psalmist says seek God. Does the psalmist describe me as I am or as I wish to be?
2. Reflect on my motives in my dealings with those I have difficulties with. Can I really be sure of the purity of my motives? What do I suspect my true, unspoken motives really are?
3. What do the promises of Ps. 51.10, 17 and Ps. 139.23-24 mean to me? How can they become a reality in my life?
4. Do I really want to see Jesus again? How important is this really to me? Am I content to live a material and outwardly moral life with social applause and then hope for the best at the resurrection? How does this impact my relationship with fellow disciples?

Practical Illustration

John 4.14, 7.38-39. Out of the believer's heart will flow streams of living water. Cup 1 – the occupied heart, water plus herbs and spices. The solution is to seek first the Kingdom of God (Matt. 6.25-31). Cup 2 – cup plus sugar – the lustful heart, preoccupied with gratification. The solution is to put aside causes for temptation (Matt. 5.28-29). Cup 3 – the ideal heart – a cup of frozen water. Frozen righteousness, expressed in a frozen lifestyle, is indigestible to those outside the Kingdom. The solution is to examine oneself and develop a gracious attitude to others (Matt. 7.1-5). Cup 4 – the resentful heart – water stained by various dyes. The solution is to seek reconciliation (Matt. 5.23-24). Many believers' hearts are a toxic combination of all of the above.

Beatitude VII
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God
(I'm gonna be a bridge builder!)

This is the only place in the entire Bible where we find the word 'Peacemaker.' Semitic languages are obliged to break this word into two, and Jesus is commending neither the peaceful nor the pacifists in this Beatitude. See Ps. 120.7, 34.14.

Peace is often limited to the absence of war or the cessation of hostilities. Ceasefires and surrenders are important preludes to peace, but they do not constitute biblical peace. Peace in the Bible is a positive concept, including the finest of loving relationships between individuals, within families, communities and nations. Peace also includes good health. The peace that Jesus is discussing is the peace of God, a force for good, mutual trust and inner security which, 'Passeth all understanding' (Phil. 4.7).

Jesus lived during the time of the *Pax Romana*, the 'Peace of Rome.' The *Pax Romana* arose from the Romans' self-belief that they had a superior system of governance, and it was their mission to impose their laws and way of life on the rest of the world. In practice, the arrival of Rome in an unconquered territory was accompanied by rape, slavery, mass killings, the complete destruction of towns and homes, and the mass deportation of the survivors. The arrival of the Roman emperor into newly-conquered territory was announced by public heralds as the '*euangelion*' or the 'Good News.' Whilst the *Pax Romana* was good news to the Romans themselves, it was terrifying news to the newly conquered.

The first disciples were called by Jesus to also pronounce the '*euangelion*' or 'Good News.' However, the 'Good News' of Jesus Christ cannot be compared with the *Pax Romana* or *Pax Britannica*. For the pronouncement of the 'Good News' of Jesus Christ includes the announcement of peace – the peace of God - to all and any who receive it. 'As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you' (Matt. 10.12-13). This peace of God involves peace with God, peace with our neighbor, and peace with ourselves.

Peace amongst disciples does not happen easily. Yet, to be Christ-like means to be a peacemaker. To maintain the peace of God, Jesus commanded His disciples to remove causes for stumbling amongst one another. 'If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea! Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes' (Matt. 18.6-7). A stumbling block is a *skandalon*. Followers of Jesus are to be aware of causes for stumbling, and to voluntarily hold back from that which would cause younger disciples a crisis of faith.

And peace is to be actively worked for. Jesus gave clear instructions to His disciples on how to maintain peace. Matthew 18.15-20 clearly indicates that if there is a cause of controversy, the offended party is to seek out the offending party and work for reconciliation. This may involve an appeal to conscience or praying for the Holy Spirit to soften the heart of the offending party. If this does not work, the matter is to be brought to the matter of 2-3 witnesses, and if that does not work, the matter is to be brought before the church family. Appeals to individual conscience, inter-personal relationships, and community harmony are to be made. And in bringing the matter before the entire church family, both sides are agreeing to live with and honor the decision of the entire church family.

What are the implications of this Beatitude?

Firstly, Jesus is the 'Prince of Peace' (Isa. 9.6). In the time of the disciples, Jesus made it plain that those homes or communities which rejected Him would also reject the peace of God (Matt. 10.12-15). And in rejecting the peace of God, they would by default be subject to whatever form of peace the dominant political forces would impose on them. All forms of human peace, e.g. the *Pax Romana* or *Pax Britannica*, are ultimately based on injustice, exploitation and oppression. At a broad level, we may understand the conflicts in the Middle East between Israelis and Arabs as happening because both sides have broadly rejected Jesus Christ as the Prince of Peace. In our families, as we reject the rule of the Prince of Peace, we will strive for *shalom* but never experience *shalom*. The same is true for our own hearts!

Secondly, an African proverb says, 'When elephants fight, the grass is trampled.' When spiritual leaders choose not to work and sacrifice for peace, but prefer to fight and form factions and gossip and criticize and point out the problems in

others, it is those young in the faith who are discouraged and fall away. And upon such leaders Jesus pronounces eternal destruction unless they repent! Pushing for what is right must always be measured against the potentially eternal cost to disillusioned young Christians.

Thirdly, peace-making may involve self-sacrifice and unjust treatment for the peacemaker. Paul wrote about Jesus Christ bringing peace between Jews and Gentiles, 'For He is our peace; in His flesh He has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us' (Eph. 2.14). Our peace with God came through the self-sacrifice of Jesus. Yet our striving for peace generally involves someone else sacrificing or apologizing or losing face in public whilst we stand on a foundation of truth and seek to come out of the process with social esteem and honor. But, to follow Jesus in peace-making involves a willingness to be personally hurt or humbled in order that the community as a whole might experience peace. If everyone is seeking for their way to be followed, there will never be peace. If everyone is seeking to make peace, regardless of the personal cost or sacrifice, the peace of God will flourish.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the personal characteristics of someone who is at peace with himself or herself?
2. Describe what the presence of the peace of God would mean in your home and church family.
3. Reflect on the causes of stumbling from others that have caused difficulty for you in your own Christian experience. How did these causes for stumbling impact your walk with God? In what ways am I a cause for stumbling to Christians around me?
4. What personal effort and sacrifice am I willing to make to be a peace-maker? How may I better reflect Jesus as the Prince of Peace in my own life?

Practical Illustration

Many are brought up on ancient histories in general, and military history in particular, e.g. Caesar's 'The Conquest of Gaul.' Today, there is huge fascination with Adolf Hitler, the SS, the Wehrmacht and the Nazi regime. Dostoevsky explored in 'Crime and Punishment' the dilemma we face when an individual kills another individual and is condemned for being a murderer, whereas when an individual kills hundreds of thousands, e.g. Napoleon, they become a great figure in world history. What are we fascinated by? Evil? By war-making generals or by the Prince of Peace?

Beatitudes VIII & IX

**Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
(I can choose to be joyful – anyway!)**

**Blessed are you when people 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 in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you
(By God's grace, I will make it through!)**

VOM video.

A critical shift is now taking place. Up to this point, all the Beatitudes can be explained in OT terms. Yet, each of these Beatitudes has their most perfect expression in the life of Jesus. We now come to the climax of the Beatitudes, and now loyalty to Jesus is openly introduced. That loyalty is inevitable if we understand Jesus is the model for the fulfillment of the pattern of righteousness portrayed in the Beatitudes.

Jesus was not executed because of His teachings per se, but because He lived and exemplified His teachings. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that it is the 'wise' who build their lives on His teachings (Matt. 7.24-27). The early followers of Jesus were persecuted not because of their inner convictions, but because they put the teachings of Jesus into practice: they lived for justice (Matt. 5.10); they proclaimed Jesus (Matt. 5.11); and they lived as Jesus did (Matt. 5.12).

The record of the early church in Acts 2-10 shows a community in which social, gender and economic barriers were being systematically removed and men, women and children were able to live in essential harmony with one another. As a result they faced social ostracism, exclusion from the synagogue, imprisonment, flogging, stoning, execution, crucifixion, enslavement, the break-up of their families and the loss of their land and homes.

Yet, to His persecuted followers, Jesus promised that He will be with them, 'To the end of the age' (Matt. 28.20). And when brought to trial, He promised to speak for them, 'When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say: for what you are to say will be given to you at that time' (Matt. 10.19). Such persecution may come from within our own families (Matt. 10.21), from within the family of faith (Matt. 10.17), or from non-believers (Matt. 10.18).

The world's reaction to Jesus and His faithful commitment to live and perfectly exemplify the Beatitudes will be the same response His disciples can expect from their faithful commitment to live in harmony with the Beatitudes. Our response to the rejection of the world will determine our relationship with God. 'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven' (Matt. 10.32-33).

'If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you....In the world you face persecution. But take courage: I have conquered the world....The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it' (John 16.18-19, 33; 1.5).

Character is not formed in times of crisis – it is revealed for what it already is. Every decision today helps to shape our character for tomorrow. We prepare for persecution tomorrow for the sake of Christ by seeking by God's grace to fully live and exemplify the Beatitudes.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. In what areas of my life am I consciously building my life on the words of Jesus? In what areas of my life am I not building on the words of Jesus?

2. How do I respond to the reality of persecution for tens of thousands of Christians today? What are my responsibilities to my persecuted brothers and sisters?
3. How may I prepare for persecution if God allows me to go through the fiery furnace for His sake?

Practical Illustration

Turn off the lights. Close the curtains. Sit in darkness. Light a small candle.

- The darker the darkness, the more brightly the candle will burn.
- Light will always be seen in darkness.
- Light will always pierce the darkness – darkness will never pierce the light.
- Candles give off smoke and grime. Revelation 1 portrays Jesus walking amongst the candles – His churches. Just as candles give off smoke and grime, so churches today give off smoke and grime, hence the imperative for every church to be filled with peacemakers.
- John 8.12, 12.32 – Jesus is the ‘Light of the World.’
- Matt. 5.14-16. Jesus’ disciples are also to be the ‘light of the world.’
- The darker the night, the brighter our witness will burn.

Following Jesus through Death

Introduction.

- As we journey through the Beatitudes, we realize that Jesus is inviting us to trust Him not only for guidance today, but also when faced with the greatest existential question we all must face: what happens when I die? Tonight, in our communion service, we will be asking whether our following of Jesus must also be a following through death itself...and to answer how this is possible, we turn to the story of the Exodus.
- The Exodus story is one of the most famous in human history. The 10 plagues, the Passover, the Angel of Death passing over the land smiting down the firstborn of every home, the crossing of the Red Sea, the destruction of Pharaoh and his army, the song of Moses – a song of freedom from slavery.
- Today, we focus on one aspect of the Exodus story – the Passover night itself. Moses commanded the Israelites to slaughter a lamb, and smear the blood on their door-posts and lintels to prevent the firstborn of the house being killed when the Angel of Death passed by overhead.
- Why on the door-posts and lintels? It would be more logical on the door itself, the entrance to the home, or even more logically, if the purpose was to protect the firstborn, on the firstborn himself.
- What was so special about the doorposts and lintels? What lesson was God teaching His people?

Israel – a changed nation.

- God's people had entered Egypt through Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers, followed years later by his entire family, approx. 70 persons in total.
- In Egypt, the Israelites had settled in the land of Goshen, in the north-eastern Nile delta. The Egyptians despised shepherds, and Goshen was ideal for animal husbandry being green and fertile.
- Over time however, the Israelites multiplied, and the Egyptians began to feel threatened. To protect themselves, the Egyptians forced the Israelites into slavery. This didn't stop the Israelites from multiplying, so the Pharaoh of the time ordered that every male Hebrew child be killed at birth.
- Moses was born to Hebrew parents, descendants of Levi, at this time. Moses grew for 40 years as a prince of Egypt, and then he fled, spending the next 40 years as a shepherd in the wilderness. God called Moses (Ex. 3) to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, but Moses was very unsure about whether this would work, for Israel was a changed nation.

Israel in Jacob's time.	Israel in Moses' time.
Shepherds.	Builders of Pharaoh's supply cities.
Free.	Enslaved.
Pastoral / nomadic.	Settled.
Living in tents.	Living in fixed homes.
Knowledge of the True God.	Lack of knowledge of the True God, knowledge of Egyptian pagan deities (Hathor at Mt. Sinai).

- Israel was becoming like their pagan Egyptian neighbors and overlords – and what did they believe?

Egypt – a pagan nation.

- The Egyptians worshipped many pagan gods, and had a very strong belief in the afterlife. The 'Book of the Dead' was a collection of incantations, hymns and spells for entering successfully into the afterlife. Many of the royal tombs have wall decorations from the 'Book of the Dead.'
- A person comprised 5 parts, and to live into the afterlife, these 5 parts needed to survive:
- **Shadow.** This was believed to reflect reality and was a real part of a person's being.
- **'Ka'** – the life force – similar to the 'breath of life' (Gen. 2.7). The 'ka' was supposed to dwell in the tomb and occupy the mummified body, partaking of the food offerings that were provided by those who cared for the tomb.
- **'Ba'** – the character traits of the deceased individual. This would leave the body and enjoy the outdoor life, returning to the tomb at night. For both the 'ba' and the 'ka' to continue their peaceful existence in the afterlife, the body needed to be preserved.
- **Physical body** – this was preserved to provide a home for the 'ka' and 'ba', ensuring the deceased survived into the afterlife. The brain was removed through the nostrils, the inner organs were removed and stored in separate

jars, the body itself was immersed in natron powder, a salty mineral that pickled the body. The body was then smothered in linen bandages, and daubed with resin, beeswax, or bitumen. The Persian word for bitumen was *mummiya* – hence the name ‘mummy.’

- **Name.** This had to survive for the individual to survive in the afterlife. Wealthy individuals and pharaohs chiseled their names in literally thousands of places to ensure their survival in the afterlife.
- The importance of the name being preserved is found in the Exodus story. Moses never mentions the personal name of Pharaoh – he had rejected God, so had no part in the afterlife, therefore Moses never records his name. The 2 Hebrew midwives whom Pharaoh commanded to kill the Hebrew infants however were loyal to God, and would participate in the afterlife, so Moses records their names (Shiphrah and Puah – Ex. 1.15).
- These beliefs impacted their architecture. Egyptians, including the nobility, lived in mud-brick homes. These were regularly washed away by the flooding of the Nile, and could be easily rebuilt.
- However, to preserve their physical bodies in death and their names for the afterlife, the wealthy and the pharaohs built temples and pyramids from stone. These could not be washed away, and thus ensured the survival of the deceased individual into the afterlife.
- The poor, including the Israelites, could not afford pyramids or stone tombs or stone monuments. Their homes were made of mud-brick. However, their lintels and door-posts were made of stone. Even if their homes were washed away or collapsed, the stone lintels and door-posts would remain.
- And it was the custom of the poor, both Egyptian and Hebrew, to write the names of the family on the door-posts or lintels, thereby ensuring the survival of the family members into the afterlife.

God’s lesson for His people.

- Through 9 plagues, God had been demonstrating His superiority to the gods of Egypt to His people. They had slowly learnt to trust Him. Now, on the Passover night, their new-found trust in God was being put to the test. The Angel of Death would be passing over, with the promise to slay the firstborn of every home, Egyptian and Hebrew.
- Those Hebrews who still trusted in the Egyptian pagan belief systems would leave their families’ names on their door-posts and lintels in the face of impending death.
- Those however who had come to trust in God, would show this trust in the face of impending death by blotting out the names of their families on their door-posts and lintels.
- God was inviting the Israelites to show their rejection of the gods of Egypt, and their trust in the Lamb of God in the face of imminent death for their eternal life. Putting the blood on the lintels and door-posts, smearing out the names of their loved ones, was the acid test of their trust in God for eternal life.

Conclusion.

- When Jesus invited the 12 disciples into the new covenant walk with God, He invited them to eat and drink from His hands. Eating and drinking from the hands of another are profound expressions of trust – for once the food and drink enter our mouths, we have no control whether it will nourish or poison us.
- And so as we eat and drink today, we are expressing absolute trust in God in a profound physical way. We are rejecting the gods and philosophies of this dying world, and trusting in the blood of Jesus Christ, the ‘Lamb of God’, the ‘paschal lamb’, for our eternal life.
- It does matter where our name is written. ‘And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the fire’ (Rev. 20.15). Jesus promises in Rev. 3.5 that ‘If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the Book of Life; I will confess your name before My Father and before His angels.’ This book is referred to as ‘The Lamb’s Book of Life’ (Rev. 21.7).
- There is more to the Christian experience than this...but as for the Israelites, so for us. The Israelites began their march to freedom and the Promised Land by putting the blood of the Passover lamb over their names and trusting the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, for their eternal life.
- As for them, so for us. Our path through life may be long and difficult, and God wishes for us to grow in our understanding and faith and obedience, but we begin our journey by asking God to cover our names with the blood of the Lamb of God, by trusting that on Calvary, Jesus Christ died in our place for our sins that we might have reconciliation with God and the promise of eternal life.