

LEARNING BASIC BIBLE STUDY METHODS

An Inductive Guide to the Bible Study Using the Book of MATTHEW

Lesson 6

THE BEATITUDES

Matthew 5:1-12

(Note: This is the sixth lesson in this series on learning how to study the Bible. To work through the series in order start with the Introduction and then proceed through the lessons in sequence.)

This section of the “Beatitudes” is one of the most loved portions of the Gospel. It forms the beginning of what has come to be known as the “Sermon on the Mount” which is recorded in Matthew 5-7. The preaching of this sermon may have come a little later in the chronology of the life of Christ; but Matthew placed it here at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry because it forms such a grand proclamation of the kingdom. It is the first of the five major discourses that Matthew includes.

We first need to fill in what Matthew has included between this passage and the last one we studied. Matthew followed the account of the temptation of Jesus with a brief note that Jesus began to preach a message of repentance because the kingdom of heaven was near (4:12-17). In order to reach a wider audience, He moved from Nazareth to the city of Capernaum, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, but more importantly, on the main highway through the land. His declaration of beatitudes would come, but not until He called for repentance.

Matthew then reported the calling of the first disciples, Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, who were fishing (4:18-20). Jesus promised to make them fishers of men, for He was beginning to build His kingdom. He then called James and John, also fishermen, who were mending nets in their boat (4:21-22). The authority of the king to call people to follow Him is clearly portrayed by these events.

Then Matthew reports the popular success of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (4:23-25). He went throughout the region proclaiming the message of the kingdom, and authenticating

His claims by healing people. Throngs of people responded to His ministry from as far away as Jerusalem.

So that brings us to the present lesson, from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus saw the crowds coming to Him, so He went up on a mountainside and sat down, the well-known posture of the teacher. The traditional location of this “mount” is the low hills behind the region of Capernaum and the other fishing villages on the shore. His disciples came to Him, and so Jesus began to teach them. And what follows is the material of Jesus’ teaching.^[1]

This is the first and longest message of Jesus that we have in the gospel. Jesus had been announcing that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, and He had been calling for people to repent. Now, in what has been described as the manifesto of His kingdom, Jesus unveils the foundations and character of life in that kingdom. Here He teaches the ethical guidelines for life in His kingdom; and the guidelines point to the quality of righteousness that characterizes life in the kingdom, now in part, but fully in the future.^[2]

The discourse was intended for the nation of Israel, the crowds who had been flocking to Jesus. But it was delivered immediately to the disciples. Jesus here considered His disciples the “true Israel” (the spiritual Israel) which is already present and beginning life in the kingdom; and He considered the crowds the “Israel” of the future, the Israel that is hoped for, who should repent and follow the king. Or to put it another way, Jesus spoke to all the people of the true will of God, the righteousness that they must all exhibit if they repent and enter His kingdom, but which the disciples had already begun to perform. So the entire sermon is directed to all. And its theme is the righteousness that is the standard of his kingdom.

So in some ways this sermon will tell people just how righteous they must be to enter the kingdom, and what that righteous life should look like for citizens of the kingdom. But it does not include the details of how this righteousness may be attained.

The sermon begins with the beatitudes. These qualities give a picture of the character of the true people of God, those who are a part of his kingdom and have the full blessings of the kingdom to look forward to. Taken together they give the picture of the perfect disciple of Christ who is the heir of the promises. Jesus does not here tell people how to become like this; that will come in subsequent teachings.

One of the most convincing descriptions of the meaning of the beatitudes at the beginning of this sermon is that they are planned echoes of Isaiah 61:1-3, a passage which is certainly eschatological^[3] in its orientation. Matthew constantly shows how Jesus came in the light of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, and so this one would fit as well. So as we study the passage we will have to look at Isaiah’s prediction of what the Messiah and the Messianic kingdom will be like.

The Beatitudes are a little different to study than ordinary story-passages. Each saying is proverb-like. Cryptic, precise, and full of meaning. Each one includes a topic that forms a major biblical theme. So you could spend a lot of time on each one--and that would be worth doing if

you so desired. But we will make this a brief, introductory Bible study on the passage, and leave more to be done later.

Reading the Text

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to Him,² and He began to teach them, saying:

³Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness,
for they will be filled.

⁷Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.

⁸Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God.

¹⁰Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Observations on the Text

So here we have a series of proclamations without a narrative. The narrative introduction simply sets up the sermon; and the sermon begins with these proclamations. Each of the beatitudes is formally a declarative sentence; but each is implicitly hortatory, calling for a response.

The method of studying these will be a little different. We still must think in terms of the contexts, not only the historical context of the first century Jewish culture and beliefs, but also the context of the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, the proclamation of the nature of the kingdom. The study of this section will have to deal primarily with the meanings of the words within those contexts, especially the context of the culture that knew these ideas from their Hebrew and Aramaic languages. Here is where it would be good to have a good word study book, or a book on biblical theological themes or ideas, and possibly a good Bible dictionary if it deals with words like “meek” or “poor” or the like.^[4]

Once the meanings of the words are understood, then we will have to consider the relationships between the clauses, primarily the connections between the “blessed” sayings and the promised result. To understand these saying we will have to relate the teachings to the biblical understanding of the kingdom of heaven as it is presented in both testaments. Here we will see that with Christ’s first coming the kingdom has been introduced--believers are in the kingdom; but we shall also see that the kingdom will yet be fulfilled in the second coming. So we will have to fit these sayings into both aspects of the idea of the kingdom.

Most summaries of the beatitudes say that there are eight of them--but you may observe nine “blesseds.” The difference is that the last saying in the list is different: it does not say “blessed are they” but “blessed are you.” Moreover, it seems to be a further clarification of the eighth one with specific application being made to the disciples.

Perhaps it would be helpful at the beginning to deal briefly with this word “blessed.” There is a desire today to translate the word with “happy.” But that does not seem to capture all that is intended here in the text, primarily because modern usage of the word “happy” has devalued it. This term is an exclamation of the inner joy and peace that comes with being right with God. Happiness may indeed be a part of it; but it is a happiness that transcends what happens in the world around us, a happiness that comes to the soul from being favored by God. That is why it can call for rejoicing under intense persecution. In some ways the Lord’s declaration of “blessed” is a pledge of divine reward for the inner spiritual character of the righteous; in other ways it is His description of the spiritual attitude and state of people who are right with God.

The opposite of Jesus’ “blessed” in Matthew 5 would be the “woes” pronounced in Matthew 23 against the scribes and Pharisees. Those woes pass judgment on the apostate people who refuse to recognize and do the full will of God. The woes describe their character as well, but it is an evil and hypocritical character; and the woes are a divine pledge of judgment if those lives continue in their wickedness.

So when Jesus says “blessed are they,” He is not only describing them as being filled with an inner sense of joy and peace because they are right with God, but He is praising them for their character and pledging divine rewards for it.

One interesting Old Testament connection that would make a good related study is the section in Proverbs 6:16-19, which lists seven things that the Lord hates. These have been taken as the antithesis of the righteous who receive this blessing from the Lord. The first one is “haughty eyes” or arrogance, which is certainly the opposite of the “poor in spirit.” The last is “one who

stirs up dissension among brothers,” which is the antithesis of the peacemaker. In between the characteristics include lying, killing, scheming wicked things, rushing to do evil, and bearing false witness. These differ sharply from the spiritual characteristics that the Lord loves.

A Close Analysis of the Beatitudes

Probably the best way to study these beatitudes would be to work through the basic process for each one--the definitions, the backgrounds, the connections and the applications. If you were teaching the beatitudes to a class you would do better by applying each one as you discuss it, rather than to wait til the end to try to apply them one by one.

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

The Old Testament Background. Part of the understanding of the beatitudes is to see the Old Testament background concerning these descriptions of the Messianic kingdom and the people who enter it. I mentioned Isaiah 61:1-3 before, and so this for one passage could be read. In it the Messiah would be anointed “to preach good tidings to the poor” (recall that in Luke 4 Jesus read that passage in the synagogue and said it was fulfilled in their hearing). That passage helps us a little with our understanding of “the poor.” We tend to think of the “poor” primarily in terms of finances or possessions. That is part of it, but there is a spiritual side to it too. The word Isaiah uses describes the people who had been taken into exile. They were of course poor, having their land and possessions ripped away; but they were also afflicted and oppressed, they were powerless and without hope, and they were desperate. The physical poverty was intensified by the poverty in their spirit.

The Meaning of the Text. The words that describe the poor in the Bible include these aspects, for the poor in Jesus’ day had few possessions, were usually oppressed, had little power and less hope. They had no resources to fall back on; they had to depend on others for survival. Isaiah brought the people of his day good news—they would be delivered from bondage. But Jesus fulfilled that promise of bringing good news by proclaiming the gospel, the “good news” of God. He did not make them rich in earthly possessions and power; but he fulfilled their greatest need.

People who are “poor in spirit” are those who are humble before God. They realize that they have nothing in this life that they can contribute to receiving the kingdom of heaven. They have afflicted their souls, meaning that they have humbled themselves and repented with deep contrition; and they have come to the king as helpless and hopeless sinners. There is no arrogance

in them, no self-righteousness, no self-sufficiency. They are free from their own pretensions, and therefore they are free for God. Everyone who wishes to enter the kingdom must be “spiritually poor,” for salvation is a gift from God.

And that is the good news for the genuinely poor and oppressed in this world. The poor person is not excluded because of his poverty; and the rich person is not accepted because of his wealth. Both must humble themselves before the Lord in order to be part of the kingdom. It is often easier for the down and out of this world to do that, than for the rich to do it.

The blessing Jesus announces that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Now this of course does not mean that all poor people are in the kingdom. One thinks of the self-made poverty of the prodigal son. No, the poverty is not the chief thing, but the qualification of the spirit it. It is the poor in spirit, those who have humbled themselves and become dependent on God--they have the kingdom of heaven. In fact, everyone who is in the kingdom had to become poor in spirit. They all come with a broken heart and a contrite spirit seeking the Savior.

Application. The clear lesson is that if any are going to enter the kingdom of heaven they must become poor in spirit. This is the message of the kingdom; it is the call of repentance. They must humble themselves before God and acknowledge that they bring nothing of their own power, possessions or merit to gain entrance. Those who truly humble themselves and express their need of the Lord, they have the kingdom of heaven. And in this they find heavenly bliss.

So how does one become poor in spirit? The implication from the context preceding this is that one would hear the message of the kingdom and learn what kind of a kingdom it is and how to enter it--through repentance for sin and submission to the will of God. The first step is to confess that by themselves they can do nothing, and then seek the gracious provision that God has made.

A secondary application would be to develop how this attitude is to characterize the attitude of the believers who are in the kingdom. They do not simply humble themselves to get in and then become self-sufficient (although some try to do it); they are to live their lives in total dependence on God to supply their needs. This will open the study to themes such as humility, faith, prayer, and obedience.

2. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Now we have a slightly different beatitude. In the last one the promise was that those who are poor in spirit have the kingdom. Here now the promise is for the future, for those who mourn will be comforted.

Old Testament Background. Isaiah also said that the Messiah would bind up the brokenhearted and proclaim the hour when the mourners would be comforted, when their ashes would be replaced by a crown of joy, and their mourning would be replaced with the oil of

gladness (61:1-3). Mourning indicates the pain and the grief and the anxieties of the soul over some loss, often the death of a loved one. But it could be over the loss of a valued life, such as those Israelites who went into exile had to mourn. Or it could be over the loss of possessions, or status, or health. People mourn over any disaster or tribulation. And in times of mourning they look for hope. And most often in this world there is little hope.

The Meaning. The focus here is on the people of God who mourn, because they will be comforted. Everyone experiences sad and tragic losses at some time or another in this life. But the mourning that leads to comfort in the kingdom is a mourning over the humiliation of Israel and its cause. The nation was in the grips of tyrannical powers and ruthless rulers--because of their sin. Jesus came and announced the kingdom was at hand; He expected the response of people would be tears of contrition (see also Isaiah 40:1). Messiah would comfort those who mourn, but the comfort would come because the Messiah would save them from their sin, the cause of the mourning.

So for mourning to be “in the faith,” it will be likewise be a mourning not just for the suffering and sadness of life, but for the sinfulness that causes it. They understand that their grieving is ultimately for a world that is lost and ruined, in which God and his will do not prevail. But in their mourning the disciples of Jesus have opened their heavy hearts to the Lord, and they know that their grieving is not without hope. They know that their weeping and grieving is but for a time only. They know that death does not have the final victory, for the dead in Christ will be raised incorruptible. They know that the Messiah will turn all that away someday. And that hope brings them comfort.

So the promise is that they will be comforted. They will be consoled above all when God wipes away all tears, and death will be no more, nor grief nor tribulation (Isa. 25:8; Rev. 21:4). This is what citizens of his kingdom can expect.

Application. The instruction here would concern the focus of the mourning, not the mourning itself. The mourning that will be comforted is the mourning of the disciples, those who have the proper understanding of the reasons for the mourning. And they will have the proper faith to see them through. As people face the sadness of life, they can do so with hope if they have mourned over sin--a clear sign of faith in the Savior.

3. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

The Old Testament Background. This beatitude is very much like the promise in Psalm 36:11, “The meek shall possess the land.” And if you study that passage you will see that it also is a Messianic psalm. The promise of the land certainly was the Promised Land.

The Meaning. In the Bible the meek are those who have a spirit of gentleness and self-control; they are free from malice and a condescending spirit. The meek may like the poor have

no resources of their own; but then they may, for Moses was described as being meek and humble (Num. 12:3). But the meek do not exploit and oppress others; they are not given to vengeance and vendettas, they are not violent, and they do not try to seize power for their own ends. In short, they have emulated the nature of Jesus in their lives and learned from him. This does not mean that they are weak or ineffective in life. They may be gentle and humble, but they can and do champion the needs of the weak and the oppressed.

The promise here is that they will possess the land. What land is meant? Probably the Promised Land. All through the Bible this was the promise to the people of Israel, a land. But possessing the land signified much more than a possession; it signified a sense of place, security, an inheritance from God. But the land was constantly invaded and the people exiled and scattered. And yet the promise of the regathering to the land remained in the promises of the New Covenant. Those promises seem now to be realized with the second coming of the Messiah when there will be a new heaven and a new earth. The promise is for all who are in the New Covenant. And the promise will be fulfilled in a far more glorious way than anyone could imagine. The new creation will not be possessed by the powerful despots, the ruthless tyrants, or the manipulative schemers. It will be possessed by the meek.

The Application. How does one become meek? What if one's nature is not meek? The answer to this comes from other passages of the Bible that describe how the spiritual life works. Meekness and gentleness and goodness are part of the fruit of the Spirit--they are produced in the Christian by the Holy Spirit. So the direction people should follow to cultivate a spirit of meekness would be to walk by the Spirit, or be controlled by the Spirit of God so that the qualities of Christ can be produced in and through them. That instruction alone will call for some study, but that is the way the Bible describes meekness developing.

4. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled”.

The Old Testament Background. The image of hunger and thirst compares this drive for righteousness with the deepest and most constant needs we have (see Ps. 42:3 and 63:1). Hunger and thirst constantly cry out for satisfaction; it is a basic human drive. The image then is portraying the desire to do the will of God as that constant and strong.

The Meaning. This beatitude is saying much more than most people think. It is not simply describing those who are righteous, or who try to do good things. It is describing their passion in life--they hunger and thirst for it. Like the poor and the meek these people put their lives into the hand of God and hope for his help.

We have already thought about righteousness with its meaning of conforming to the standard, i.e., doing the will of God. Here the word probably has two meanings. One would certainly be in the personal life--the strong desire to be pleasing to God, to do what God wants, to

live up to the will of God. But out of this would grow the desire for righteousness in the land, for social justice in a world that is unrighteous and unjust. The desire for personal righteousness cannot be separated from the world around.

And because that is a proper desire it will be fulfilled. It may not be filled immediately, but certainly shall be in the future when the king establishes his reign of righteousness. But the promise of the King is that the desire for righteousness will be filled. Theologically this happens in several stages. The basic desire to be right with God is met by the gracious gift of righteousness. This we call justification, being declared righteous in the courts of heaven. Then, as a disciple of the Savior, the desire to do righteous works will find fulfillment by the power of the Spirit. This we call practical sanctification, becoming more and more like Christ. And in the future, when the Lord returns and establishes universal righteousness, we shall be changed. This we call glorification, being transformed into the glorious state.

The Application. Here too we must ask how this desire is developed. Most Christians are for righteousness--but how does the desire become so intense? It also has to come from the development of the spiritual life. Paul teaches that the spiritual person is one who yields his or her members as instruments of righteousness. So it begins with commitment to God's will. Then, as the spiritual walk is guided by the Holy Spirit, He leads the believer into righteousness. And the closer one lives to the Lord, the more sensitive he or she becomes to the unrighteousness and injustice in the world. The truly spiritual person then will begin to long for righteousness.

5. “Blessed are the Merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”

The Meaning. One thing that is common to the poor in spirit, the meek, and those who hunger for righteousness is that their life is not self sufficient but looks outward for help. They understand mercy for they know their own inadequacies, dependence, weaknesses and incompleteness. And, when they receive gracious and merciful bounty from the King, they in turn know to show mercy to others. Showing mercy to others includes both the forgiveness of the sinner and compassion for the suffering and the needy.

They are called blessed because they place showing mercy above their own rights; they take no hostile stand against people in need, but try to show kindness to others and heal wounds. It is not that they are merciful by nature, but because they have been shown mercy and live in constant dependence on the Lord.

And because they understand mercy and show mercy to others, the word from God is that they shall obtain mercy. Ultimately this looks forward to the coming of the king and the day of judgment when by his mercy they will be welcomed through the judgment and into the kingdom. They will receive mercy, not because they did enough good deeds, but because they understood how important mercy is in their own spiritual pilgrimage and having entered into that state of grace were eager to share it with others. They learned to forgive others because they were

constantly being forgiven; they learned to show mercy to others because they were being shown mercy every day.

The Application. Here to the act of showing mercy comes from the genuine spiritual experience. People who know more of God's mercy will be merciful. It is important, then, that people have a good understanding of the grace of God in their own lives. This will come from the experience of confession of sin and thanksgiving for forgiveness--two aspects of the believers walk that often get neglected. Christians sometimes get to the point of thinking that they deserved the grace they have received, and they become then intolerant of others, even judgmental. The reality of our own spiritual condition and God's provision must never be forgotten.

6. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

The Meaning. This beatitude picks up an Old Testament image and applies it to its fulfillment in the kingdom. It describes both an inner purity and a singleness of mind. The “heart” is used in the Bible for the will, the choices. And so to be pure in heart means that the decisions one makes, the desires one has, the thoughts and intentions of the will, are untarnished by sin, and that the will is determined to be pleasing to God. From the pure of heart come only good things, acts of love and mercy, desires for righteousness and justice, decisions that please God.

The description of the human “heart” outside the household of faith is very different--at its worst it is constantly acting selfishly and causing pain (Gen. 6:5). Jesus said it was what came from the heart that defiled people, evil thoughts, impure desires, blasphemies and the like (Matt. 15:18,19). Nothing short of a change of heart will bring about a pure heart. Jesus does not explain that here; but his language of being born again will necessarily begin the process. The transformation from a heart of flesh to a pure heart will come by following Christ, but it will not be an easy or a swift change. But those who enter this kingdom of righteousness must have this new heart.

And the promise for them is that they will see God. What an incredible statement! The Bible says that no one has ever seen God (Exod. 33:18-23; 1 Tim. 6:16). People have seen appearances of the Lord in various forms, like Moses on Mount Sinai seeing the hem of the garment(Exod. 33), or the Israelite leaders eating with the Lord and seeing the God of Israel in the form of the revealed presence (Exod. 24), or an Isaiah (Isa. 6) or John (Rev. 1).

One aspect of this promise is here and now by faith--they will see God in all the events and circumstances of life. But the Bible promises much more. Here on earth the vision of God is denied to us; but one day when heaven will be opened he will be visible to our transfigured eyes. As Job said, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes--I and not another. Howe my heart yearns within me” (Job 19:25-27).

The Application. How does one gain a pure heart? It begins with conversion when God gives us a “new heart,” and it continues through the spiritual growth as we follow Christ. Walking in the light, meaning learning to live by the word of God, will change the way we think so that our hearts will grow more and more pure. But as the light of the word reveals impurities, we must deal with them and change.

7. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God.”

The Meaning. God is the God of peace; His whole plan of redemption is to provide peace with God for those who were formerly alienated from God, and ultimately bring peace to the whole world (Isa. 9:6,7). This is the goal of the work of the Messiah.

But in the human race, however, there is strife and conflict with little hope for peace and unity. The peace that God brings is not a cessation of hostilities, tolerance, or the readiness to give way. True peace that the world needs calls for a complete change of nature. And only God can give this kind of peace. It is a peace that the world does not understand (John 14:27). It begins with reconciliation with God and extends to reconciliation with other people.

Those who are peacemakers are then first and foremost people who understand what true peace is. Their effort is to strive to establish a peace that embraces God’s provision of peace, so that people will be in harmony with one another because they are at peace with God. In other words, the true peacemakers are they who promote the kingdom of God. Their lives are given to working for promoting the kingdom of God, reconciling adversaries, quenching hatred, uniting those who are divided, promoting true understanding and spiritual love. And they do this because they know what true peace is. So the quality described here is one that is spiritual and not simply a political seeking of peace.

And the promise is that they shall be called the sons of God. That means they will be true children of God. This adds to what life will be like in the kingdom--possession of land, stilling of hunger, vision of God, and now sonship. And all these begin when people enter the kingdom by faith, but will be fulfilled completely when the kingdom finally comes.

In the Old Testament “sons of God” is a description of angels, and rarely is such language used for salvation. But in the New Testament sonship is a powerful expression for salvation. It means that believers have been born into the family of God by the Holy Spirit, and that those so designated have a personal relationship with the Father through Christ the Son, that they are joint heirs with Him, that they have a place in their heavenly home by birthright. Not yet in the full sense, but truly in the certainty of the promise can believers say, “We are called the children of God” (see John 1:12,13 and 1 John 3:1).

The Application. So the disciples of Jesus should be promoting peace. They do this by spreading the Gospel of peace to the world, and by promoting reconciliation within the household of faith as well. In short, they should be doing the work of the Messiah.

8. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The Meaning. In this fallen world when people try to promote peace, or champion righteousness, or live a life of gentleness and meekness, they find opposition. One would think that such a life would attract people to the kingdom of God. But the fact that it does not naturally do that tells us clearly that the race is not only alienated from God, but in rebellion to God. They might want a form of justice, but in their own terms. They much prefer power, and privilege, and possessions. And so John the Baptist called for righteousness and went to an early death. And Jesus proclaimed all the right virtues but found opposition to his message because it called for them to enter his kingdom. And if they persecuted these, will they not also oppose the disciples?

The beatitude is not simply for all who have suffered persecution. God, as the righteous judge of the earth, will deal with that as well. But this beatitude is for followers of Christ, those who suffer persecution for the sake of righteousness. And as the next verse clarifies to the disciples, that means suffering for Christ’s sake. They have been identified by faith with the King, they carry his name, and they proclaim the good news that there is a kingdom of righteousness and peace that is spiritual and eternal. But they will find opposition. Nevertheless, they should rejoice, for their reward in heaven will be great. God will make it up to them, and more.

But the blessing stated here for those who suffer such persecution in this world is that their destiny will be a complete contrast to their present humiliation--theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And that, the disciples know, is something worth dying for. But it is not a future reality only--they have it now (and so this blessing parallels the first).

The Application. The lesson would simply be that people should be living for Christ in this world, living the way members of the kingdom should live, championing righteousness and justice, showing mercy, remaining meek and poor in spirit--all the things that the beatitudes praise. But they should know that genuine righteousness is offensive to many, and so they will be prepared for opposition.

The last couple of verses have an implicit claim to deity by Jesus. In the Old Testament the prophets were persecuted because of their faithfulness to God. Now Jesus says that His disciples will be persecuted because of their faithfulness to Him. He is God.

¹¹If you read widely about this portion of the Bible you will find a great range of views and interpretations. The very radical views, the skeptical views, we do not have to spend much time here discussing--that can await a more opportune time. But you should know that there is a very vocal group of teachers and writers who are teaching that practically nothing in the Gospels is true--that Jesus did none of these things, and said very few of the things he was supposed to have said. To them Matthew did not write Matthew, but the book was the product of teachings in the church from a much later period, most of which were embellished if not fabricated. This is not a new position, just better published today because of modern means. The view still means that these chapters have been fabricated, no matter how you look at it.

A less offensive view, but still somewhat problematic on several levels, is that the Sermon on the Mount is what Jesus taught, but not here and not in one sermon. The teachings have been moved from other settings to form this sermon. This view at least acknowledges that what we have in Matthew 5-7 are the teachings of Jesus himself. It simply says that Matthew has put this material together in this place to form one major address on the kingdom. In theory one could accept some of this, if it could be shown that that is exactly what Matthew did. But proving such a theory would be difficult to do.

The plain reading of the text supports the traditional view that this was a message proclaimed by Jesus. The passage begins by saying that Jesus taught them, saying . . . And then the teachings follow one after another on the related topics of the kingdom. And then Matthew says he finished. For those who believe the Scriptures are historically true in what they affirm, it would be appropriate to say that wherever Matthew or the other writers connect a sermon or teaching to a place and time, that is where it was given. If there is no such note, then the material might have been put together.

To say Jesus delivered this Sermon on the Mount, then, does not necessarily mean that these are the exact words that were used. Matthew has translated the teachings into Greek; and he very well may have condensed some of the teachings and put them in his own words; and he may have appended clarifications to some of the things that are in the sermon. Comparisons with Luke and with other teachings in the Gospels may suggest some of this went on. But we can also be sure that Jesus probably preached these themes rather frequently in his Galilean ministry, and so the memory of them would reflect the oft-repeated themes. In sum, the study of the sermons and teachings of Jesus is a rather involved study and not easy to address with any certainty. We shall return to this matter (called "historical criticism") later at the end of the study of Matthew when we summarize the various issues to be included in the study of this book. I will just say at this point that I believe that the reader can be confident that these are indeed the teachings of Jesus, and that the wording presents what Jesus said, either precisely, or in summary form (as was done with Matt. 4:17). Matthew's record of the Sermon on the Mount was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so that what is written in these chapters is the truth, and truly what Jesus taught in his sermon.

[2] There is an enormous amount of literature on the Sermon on the Mount, which, in time, you may begin to work through. But at the risk of oversimplifying the issue of the meaning and nature of the sermon, these comments will do for now.

[3] Another big word, “eschatology” is the study of last things; it is the portion of doctrine that deals with the events yet to come, such as the second coming, the judgment, the eternal state. It is primarily concerned with “Messianic” events, things that Jesus the Messiah will do to fulfill all things

[4] You can work for the time being with whatever resources you might have, perhaps a commentary or perhaps a good dictionary. If you really get into Bible study it would be of great benefit to invest in a couple of thorough sets on the meanings of words and theological ideas-- Colin Brown’s (editor) set for the New Testament, and Willem van Gemeren’s (editor) for the Old Testament. These are both several volume sets, but certainly would give you all the word study material you would need on both testaments. See the recommended lists at the end of the studies.