

The Beatitudes

Stepping Stones to Salvation

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Authored by: Mark Watson

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Background

I can still remember the first time that I read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and the impact that it had on me. It was almost as if God dropped a stone into the still pool that is my inner being, and even today so many years later the ripples are still spreading out - a direct encounter with the power of paradox and the power of the living Christ. In that time I have returned to Jesus' message again and again. I think that like so much of the Bible it is something that is simply too big to take in through just one visit. With this in mind, all I can hope to achieve through this study is to share something of the great challenge that I believe this particular message presents to all believers, and in doing that encourage us to consider our own faith, and what our response to this challenge should be. It is a challenge that perhaps you would not immediately think of when you first read this passage - certainly the message is something that I would encourage you to come back to because at its heart lies the road to Salvation. I am sure you will never leave empty-handed.

The Message

The Challenge

One of the greatest challenges to us today is to be a 'real Christian'. In a recent magazine article, the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity¹ stated that "*It is not simply that many Christians don't know how to share the Gospel, it is that many Christians don't know how to live it.*" So often we are diminished by every trick the enemy has to throw at us: doubt, compromise, pride...the list seems endless. We may experience teaching that provides us with no real 'meat' - simply 'milk' that keeps us going, but does not provide us with what we need to grow. We may also not accept the nourishment we are provided in our Church and consequently stagnate and fail to grow. Trying to understand what it is to be a 'real Christian' is therefore a message that is so very much needed today, because in some places the gospel message has been diluted or even eradicated totally. The practices in some places would likely cause Jesus to weep, even as He wept over Jerusalem.

The simple truth is that of all the spheres in our life, the place where we should feel able to be our most 'real' is within the Church as part of the Body of Christ. The challenge to each and everyone of us then is to know if we are 'in the faith', "*Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves.*"² - for we should not seek to place the blame elsewhere...it starts with us and us alone. Do we experience our faith as 'God on our terms' or do we surrender ourselves to our Lord and Saviour and say "*Not my will, but yours be done.*"³ In these times, we need to humble ourselves before God and remember where our help comes from (Psalm 121:1-2), and seek for ourselves what it is to be real, what it means to live as the people of God.

¹ Evangelical Alliance 'Idea' Magazine, Sept/Oct 2005

² 2 Corinthians 13:5a

³ Luke 22:42

The Bible tells us that:

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.”⁴

We will return to this verse later in the study, but with this in mind we should have the courage to be absolutely honest with ourselves and with God, and allow ourselves to undergo a ‘spiritual check-up’⁵, asking ourselves tough questions like ‘Where are we really with God?’, ‘How would Jesus act in this situation?’, ‘How do we measure up against the ten commandments?’ or ‘Have we grown in our faith in the last 6 months?’.

Using the accompanying worksheet, spend a few minutes thinking about the things that set you apart and make you a real Christian, and then write them down. What are the signs of a true believer? Do we do our utmost to protect the places where the walls have crumbled and rebuild the walls of our faith or do we attempt to whitewash over it and hope that everything will be OK (see Ezekiel 13:4-16)? Let us be under no illusion – this can be really difficult. But a key part of our faith and our discipleship is community. We are not alone. This provides opportunity to mutual accountability, support and love. How heaven rejoices over a sinner that repents. If you are in a group, once you have completed the worksheet spend a few minutes sharing what you have written down. We will return to your answers at the end of this study.

So what does the Sermon on the Mount tell us about being a real Christian?

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

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

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

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

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”

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

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

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” ←

“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.”⁶

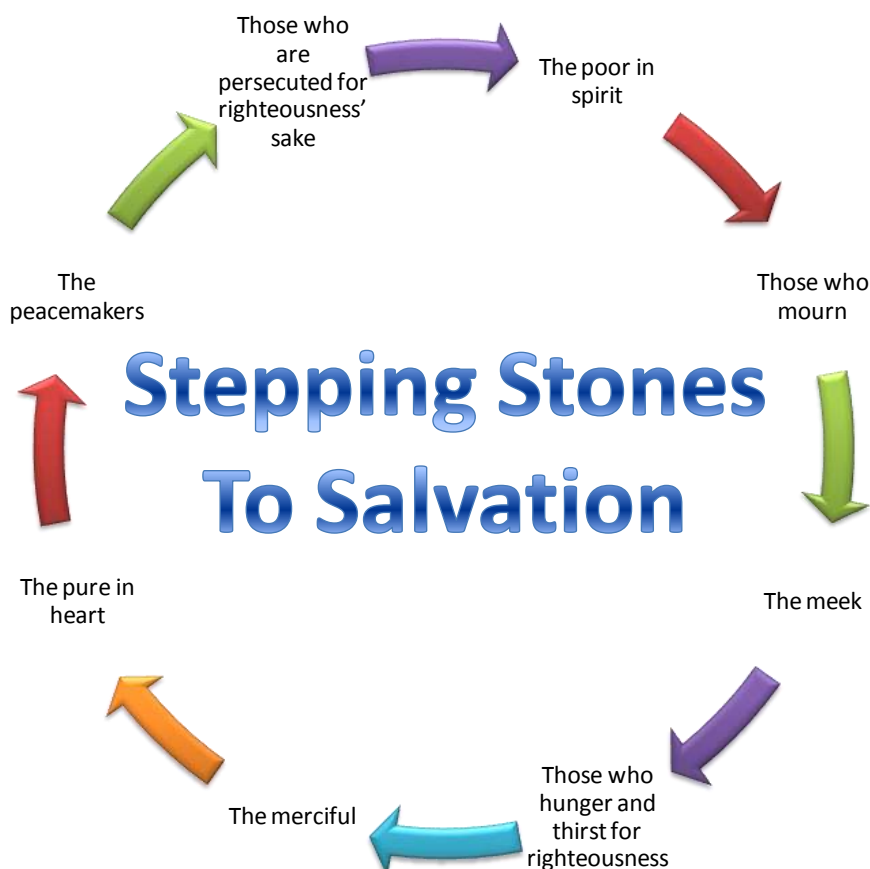
Note that the first blessing (the poor in spirit) and the eight blessing (persecuted for the sake of righteousness) end with the phrase “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This is known grammatically as ‘an inclusion’, and implies that in order for us to inherit the kingdom of heaven, everything between verse 3 and v 10 is required of us!! Not one, or two - but all.

⁴ Romans 8:1-2

⁵ One aspect of such a spiritual check up is discernment, which we cover in another study

⁶ Matthew 5:1-12

In this study, we hope to reveal how each of these blessings are interlinked, with one following the other and how they apply to us as believers; how together they represent stepping stones to salvation that we must step over again and again as our faith grows:



The poor in spirit

In Psalm 19: 7 we read “*The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving⁷ the soul.*” When we encounter the Ten Commandments, and begin to show from our innermost being fear and reverence for the Lord there should be recognition in our heart that there is nothing that we have that can commend us to God. Romans 3:23 tells us that we have all “*sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” We become poor in spirit, as we are broken by the enormity of our sin and humbled by the overwhelming love and grace that God has for each and every one of us. Every time we have communion as we read and remember the words of Jesus on the night He was betrayed at the last supper, we should be broken again – as His body was broken for us. A hallmark of the poor in spirit is repentance – and this should be a continual process. The law of the Lord brings us to our knees before Christ, yet how often do we hear a message of repentance in our churches today – or is it always God on our terms? We should remember that an attitude of no repentance leads to judgement which is essentially justice according to God’s law. Sadly these days the Law of the Lord is often forgotten or diluted by compromise, and the gospel message is sometimes forgotten. But are we poor in spirit? If we are, ours is the kingdom of heaven.

⁷ I am not convinced that the NRSV translation does justice here, with the Hebrew word for here translated ‘reviving’ (shûb) means to turn back or away, to restore or convert

Those who mourn

From being poor in spirit, a natural reaction is to show sadness and remorse – to mourn. We mourn for our own sin, and our failings. When we see how poor in spirit we really are, we will mourn, and of course there can only be one comforter – the Holy Spirit (John 14:16 & 26). When we mourn for our own sin through an encounter with the Law of the Lord our soul will be ‘converted’ and ‘restored’ as we experience internal renewal and recognition of the salvation that comes from Jesus. We turn away from our sin to face the risen Christ. This is illustrated by the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19. When Jesus saw Zacchaeus’ response to his encounter, He said *“Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”*⁸ Zacchaeus had a ‘heart change’ that we should all yearn for, changing from an attitude of ‘what do we get out of it’ to ‘what can we do?’ Do we truly mourn for our sins? Do we still come before the Lord in repentance? Do we want to place our trust and faith in the Lord and be comforted?

The meek

This implies gentleness and humility which are signs of salvation – really being saved, demonstrated by how we deal with other people - at church, at home and at work / out socially. This is not something that is instantaneous. We all need to grow in faith. If we are poor in spirit, and truly mourn then our encounter with the mercy of God that triumphs over judgement will bear meekness in our lives. We are at peace with God, we will inherit the earth.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

The word used for hunger in Matthew’s account has a sense of craving and suffering real want. The word used for thirst has a sense of eagerly longing for those things by which the soul is refreshed, supported and strengthened. If we experience poverty of spirit, mourning and meekness we will hunger and thirst for righteousness. We will yearn / crave for more of the Lord and His righteousness. I don’t think I can recollect ever being really hungry, apart from times of fasting. And times of thirst have always been short-lived. What is it like to really hunger and thirst - to crave? When I think of people less fortunate than I – people who truly know what it is to hunger and thirst, I am broken and ashamed. But do we crave with thirst for the streams of living water? Jesus tells us “those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”⁹ When we stand before the Lord are we right? Do we come before God on our terms, or on His? Do we yearn / crave for the Lord? If we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we will be filled.

The merciful

A sign of the blessing and mercy that we have received in Christ should be the mercy that we give to others – a fruit of the mercy that we have been shown, also springing from a position of righteousness. Perhaps the best account of this in scripture is found in Matthew 18:21-35. Here the debtor owed his master more than he could possibly ever hope to pay, and had nothing with which to be able to settle the debt. Yet the Lord of that slave was moved with compassion at the plight of his servant and showed him absolute mercy. He could simply have said I will give you more time to pay, or I will let you pay back less – but he released him AND forgave the debt. Unfortunately the debtor, having had his debt cancelled and being released, did not show mercy as he had been shown mercy. He was not a righteous man. A sign of the process we go through in the beatitudes – and our experience of repentance, mourning, utter reliance on Christ and yearning for righteousness – the mercy that we have received is that we too show mercy. In Christ we are forgiven, we have been shown mercy, but have we accepted His precious gift in our hearts? We need to recognise and acknowledge our need, since forgiveness and mercifulness are aspects of the character of a true Christian - aspect of Christ Himself.

⁸ Luke 19:9-10

⁹ John 4:14

This account provides such important insight into the nature of the kingdom, revealing so much more than the nature of forgiveness. It also gives us insight into the nature of true and false converts, and true and false believers, reminding us of the account we read earlier in Ezekiel. And it tells us of the debt that Christ has paid for us. He has set us free and forgiven our sins. We must ask ourselves to we truly forgive people and in that release them, or do we hold grudges or make our forgiveness conditional?

The pure in heart

Another sign of a true believer is purity of heart, and like so many aspects of our study thus far it requires growth. If we are righteous and show mercy, the things of the world that constrain us will be loosed and we will be pure in heart. The verse we looked at from Corinthians earlier in the study implies that we need to continuously examine our heart and measure it against what we know of the Word. This is illustrated by the blind man's journey into faith in John 9:1-39. If we are pure in heart we shall see God, and for the blind man this was progressive. When asked who Jesus was on each occasion his answer changed – “*the man called Jesus*” (v11), “*He is a prophet*” (v17), the Son of Man – “*Lord I believe*” (v35-38). Do we want to see God in our daily lives?

The peacemakers

To be a son or daughter of God we need to be peacemakers. The ability to be a peacemaker follows the sequence so far, and we must be at peace with God which springs from repentance. We must strive for peace in all situations. This is really difficult, especially when we encounter worldliness. This also raises a challenge for intercession. Do you feel called to be an intercessor? Do you feel a real burden to pray for peace? Remember peace can affect many aspects of our lives, starting from within the home, the church, the workplace, social circles, society, and reaching relationships / tensions between countries.

Those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake

The blind man in John 9 was persecuted because of the righteousness of Jesus. The Pharisees told him, ““You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.”¹⁰ If we do not know Christ, we cannot be persecuted for His righteousness. We may have an expectation that just because we are a Christian that we will never encounter hardship, we will never face persecution. Even today there are people who are martyred for their faith – the persecuted Church. There are over 200 million Christians who face persecution worldwide (take a look at <http://www.opendoorsuk.org/> or <http://www.opendoors.org>).

Our Response

Any challenge should illicit a response. Our response to the challenge we have looked at together should therefore involve a heartfelt change in our attitude, a call to repentance and a fervent hope for revival & renewal of our faith. This is so important, because all the way through the scriptures Jesus talks consistently about what real faith is as opposed to false faith; real believers as opposed to false believers; a true gospel as opposed to a false gospel; real signs and wonders as opposed to lying signs and wonders, and He goes through these things over and over again so we would not be deceived and caught out. This is something we covered in more detail in our study on the Fruit of the Spirit. In all of this we must constantly remind ourselves that we are not alone...God wants to support and sustain us, to help us to persevere and run the race. He wants to dust us off and pick us up when we fall and once again bring us back into his loving arms as we encounter afresh his grace that is truly sufficient for us. Neither are we alone corporately – and there are practical things we can do to help and encourage each other within the Body of Christ.

¹⁰ John 9: 34

God wants to lead us to a place of favour – a place of blessedness. The process we embark upon – the stepping stones - will draw us closer to Jesus, to the ‘author and finisher of our faith’, to salvation.

Read each of the following quotations, one at a time, and after each spend a few moments in silent meditation:

“Who shall 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.”¹¹

“There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family.”¹²

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it.” For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it. “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.”¹³

Questions

1. What aspects of our life can we bring before the Lord that present barriers to receiving His blessing and growing as Christians?
2. What can we do differently in our life that would help us to grow?
3. Read through the beatitudes and then read through the response diagram at the end of this study and bring each aspect before the Lord in prayer, and ask Him to bless you. How is God challenging us & what changes do we need to make in our lives?

¹¹ Psalm 24:3-5

¹² Proverbs 6:16-19

¹³ Matthew 7:13-20

Our Response

