



## The Sermon on the Mount: Ethics of the Kingdom in the Beatitudes

### A study of Matthew 5:1-12

#### Overview

The Sermon on the Mount reveals the inverted reality of Kingdom life: it describes God's blessing resting on the unlikely ones: the poor in spirit, mourners, the meek, peaceful, and persecuted. It is nearly the polar opposite of the way our culture promotes the type A personality, the alpha male, the strong female and IQ, EQ, and CQ savvy people. Someone once said, **"The Kingdom in God's eyes is a paradox in ours. That's why only those with transformed hearts get new eyes to see God and true spirituality."**

#### The Setting

The location for Jesus extended teaching is given in Matthew 4:23-25. His early ministry was in the northern area of Israel in the Galilee region. He taught in many synagogues, many of which are never mentioned in the Bible. His fame was spreading and people came from all over to hear Him. As the crowds gathered, he found it necessary to locate a better teaching environment where they could hear him.

It was the pattern of the rabbis of His day, to take their disciples with them as they taught. While they had counted the commandments of the books of Moses (Law, or Torah) and determined there were 613 rules, they knew that many were not explained as to how they applied to everyday life. They had to be seen in action to be understood. That is the background to Luke 6:40 and provides important context to Matt 5:1. The disciples stayed close to the rabbi so that they didn't miss anything and were in training to become "just like their teacher" (heb. for rabbi). As a result, "...when he sat down, his disciples came to him." **This opening sentence, when rightly understood, begs that we ask ourselves the question, "do I really want to be just like my Teacher? Have I contented myself only with knowing His words, or am I truly pursuing His character in all things?"**

It was also customary that the Torah/Pentateuch was read standing up at the *bemah* bench or table for the Scrolls. It was to show honor toward God's Word. That is why the tradition is often different from Christian tradition in which the preacher or teacher stands to teach, but in Biblical Judaism the teacher is never above the Word and sits to teach. No wonder the disciples were said to "sit at the feet of the rabbi."

#### The Beatitudes

The word *beatitude* comes from the Latin which translates the word for blessed. It is understood to mean happy, but in the sense that one is happy through the approval of God. In the Hebrew, there are two words which translate into English with the word blessed. One is the word, *barak*, and speaks of God and His blessing or unmerited favor. It is often the word for which the Psalmist says, "Bless the Lord, oh my soul." The other word is *ashrei* and is an exclamatory term. It is blessing that results from positive action. This is seen in Psalm 119:1 and Proverbs 29:18b. The person who walks in God's ways finds happiness in their heart due to obedience. This is the Hebrew word Jesus no doubt used as He taught. **True blessing in our soul means that negative feelings, circumstances, or difficult conditions can't take away the blessedness of the one who is in right relationship with God.**

## A Final Challenge

Living out the character of the Kingdom is not an easy thing to do. Jesus teaching indicates that these qualities are the possession of Kingdom people, that is to say, they are descriptive not prescriptive. If we try to manifest these attitudes it is good, but it doesn't guarantee Kingdom citizenship. Maintaining these is an inside out work of God. As we focus on Him, He changes who we are and it becomes evident in our character and that is why we are happy. Perhaps that's why people over the centuries have claimed to be believers, but their behavior betrays them.

**Mahatma Gandhi** was a big fan of the Beatitudes. He once said, "The message of Jesus as I understand it is contained in the Sermon on the Mount, unadulterated and taken as a whole...If then I had to face only the Sermon on the Mount and my own interpretation of it, I should not hesitate to say, 'Oh, yes, I am a Christian.' But negatively I can tell you that in my humble opinion, what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount...I am speaking of the Christian belief, of Christianity as it is understood in the West."

How do our behavior and core attitudes today reflect the true teaching of rabbi Jesus on that windswept hillside almost 2,000 years ago? Are His words as relevant today as they were then; to people living in contemporary cultures on different continents?

