

“How Can I be Blessed?” Part I

Matthew 5:1-6

Picture Jesus teaching to crowds sitting down on the mountainside in northern Galilee, as recorded for us in Matt. 5-7. Sitting in this calm atmosphere, looking out at a lake with a fresh breeze probably blowing across your face, you listened to Jesus as He taught with authority, not like the teachers of the Law with all their meticulous laws about the Law. And like the breeze and blue sea that physically refreshes you, you listen to Jesus spiritually refresh you and tell you what God really says what it means to live a blessed life.

The key to understanding the Sermon on the Mount is found in 5:17-20. Here Jesus assures His hearers,

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.²⁰For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus’ teaching was challenged by the religious leaders because He didn’t keep the traditions they had imposed on the people, as if what they said was what God said. As if in keeping all these rules then you would be blessed of God. If you’ve been misled for a long time, its easy to question this ‘new teaching’. But Jesus wasn’t teaching anything new; He was scraping away the grime the religious leaders had covered over the Law with their rules.

But Jesus said something shocking: He said *unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*” How can anyone be more righteous than the Pharisees? Easy. The Pharisee’s righteousness was all external; Jesus says let’s deal with the heart.

So, He begins with 8 blessings; eight being the number Scripture uses at times to describe that which is one better than perfect! V. 11 is an expansion of v.10 because it was so radical. If you look at v.3 and v.8 you notice that they end the same, which was a stylistic way of saying v.3 is the beginning and v.10 is the end and everything in-between is one unit. Some have wondered about these kingdom blessings, are they for the future only or for now only? The text says they are both. V.3 and v.10 say that the kingdom is yours and that blessing 2-7 are all in the future tense; in other words, there is a present aspect and a future aspect of the kingdom.

So how does the kingdom reveal itself now and what will it look like in the future? The future reality of the Kingdom is the return of Jesus the King to earth who will exercise His political, moral and spiritual will on the world. Kingdom means the domain of the king. We look forward to the day when Jesus will reign over the earth and will exercise His dominion over everyone.

But what did Jesus the King do the first time? He exercised His authority over the spiritual domain (casting out demons), the physical domain (healing lepers, blind and even bringing some back to life) and even the earth itself (calming storms, changing water to wine). And, more importantly He forgave the sins of people and changed their hearts when they placed their faith in Him as their Messiah. So, the kingdom exists now for those who believe Jesus has authority over all these things and so we submit to His rule by obeying His Word and praying by faith for healing and the cessation of demonic activity and for Jesus to demonstrate His power by meeting our needs and changing the hearts of people. Jesus still has dominion over all these things now but He exercises His will through the prayers and faith of His people, and through circumstances, timing in our lives and the world. Our job is to give witness of His dominion activity to those who have yet to believe in Him, so they also can experience the future reality of His rule when He returns.

When Jesus begins “Blessed are”, right away His Jewish hearers would think of one of the most repeated prayers in the Old Testament in Num. 6:24-26. There God commanded Aaron to announce and pray over the people in the context of worship this benediction:

²⁴ *“The LORD bless you and keep you; 25 the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; 26 the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”* ²⁷ *“So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”*

Nearly every Jewish person desired God’s blessing but how do you know if you have it? How do you and I know if we’re blessed of God? Jesus assures the people you can know you have God’s blessing and the reality of the King’s rule in your life if you . . .

Living for the Approval of God **(5:3)**

The word blessing has two main ideas: favour and joy. To be blessed of God means God has favoured you, He has graced you. And that makes you happy, content, filled with joy. It’s not a happiness based on circumstances but a joy based on confidence that God is with you and for you. We have His approval.

Since the sermon on the Mount is a contrast with the teaching of the Pharisees, what did they teach on how you knew if God has blessed you? Since Jesus says ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’ it is easy to figure that the successful and usually wealthy and pious religious leaders would have said that’s how you know you have God’s blessing. And there are all kinds of Scripture you can twist into saying that.

But Jesus uses Scripture Himself. All of these blessings are allusions to Old Testament passages. Jesus was probably alluding to two passages out of Isaiah, 57:15 and 66:2;

¹⁵ *For this is what the high and exalted One says—
he who lives forever, whose name is holy:
“I live in a high and holy place,
but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly
and to revive the heart of the contrite.*

² *Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?” declares the LORD.
“These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit,
and who tremble at my word.*

In many cases the physically poor were associated with humility. In prov. 16 19 we read,

*¹⁹ Better to be lowly in spirit along with the oppressed
than to share plunder with the proud.*

Jesus Himself would teach things like 'the last shall be first and the first shall be last' and 'whoever wants to be great among you must become your servant.' The poor in spirit are those who have no resources within themselves to achieve God's blessing; they recognize their sinfulness and God's holiness. And that's who God wants to bless; when we,

Admit our spiritual bankruptcy

We all fall short of God's glory because we all sin. To be part of God's kingdom means to accept that the King only has the power to bless you, and thankfully its not based on physical wealth or external piety. It's based on a contrite heart; a heart that acknowledges our lack of spiritual resources to make ourselves right with God. Those who confess their sins and the need for forgiveness receive the kingdom; they

Accept God's rule for your life

If Jesus is the Messiah and He will rule this earth one day, we must place our faith in Him now, believing that He has dominion over us even now and therefore we seek to obey Him now by faith, even though as Heb. 2:8 says, *'we do not see everything subject to Him yet'*.

Listen to Jesus explain how obedience and confident joy works:

John 15:9 "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

We experience the joy of King Jesus when we submit to His commands in His Word and that obedience assures us of His remaining/abiding presence. And we will see the power of His kingdom presence in our life. Paul said in Col. 1:27-28

²⁷ To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸ He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

The 'mystery' that wasn't revealed in the Old Testament was that the Messiah Himself would dwell in us, in the present assuring us of future glory. You don't have to look successful on the outside to make God's face shine on you; you have to be right on the inside.

Because for many of Jesus' listeners life was hard; they were poor. They were oppressed. By the Romans politically and burdened by the Pharisees religiously. They needed hope and encouragement. Blessing £ 2 says,

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

While Jesus certainly will comfort us who grieve over lost loved ones, He is not talking about this kind of grief. Related to the poverty of spirit, admitting our lack of spiritual resources to save ourselves Jesus says we are blessed of God when we . . .

Grieve Over Sin Like God and Jesus **(5:4)**

This is more than our initial need for Jesus as Lord of our life, but if we truly have submitted to Jesus – and He dwells in us – then proof of His ruling our life is that we grieve over present sins as well as those who we know struggle with sin. Let's look at two individual examples, first in Luke 15, the story of the unrepentant older brother, which we call the Prodigal son. In the parable of the Prodigal son the rebellious son runs away son and wastes his father's blessings on selfish living and when he realizes he has nothing, he admits he is sinned against heaven (God) and his father. He realizes his sinfulness and returns home.

'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² *"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'*

The older son however, is not happy of his brother's repentance. He lived in his self-righteousness ['I've always been the good son']. He did not rejoice in his brother's repentance and did not agree with his father's forgiveness and restoration. He saw himself as better and worthier of having a party for himself. This was Jesus' message to the Pharisees; you don't rejoice when the prostitutes, sinners, tax-collectors or any of your brothers mourn their sins and place their faith in Me and My Father.' They went through the rituals of doing sacrifices but there was no grief over personal sin and so there was no grief over the lostness of others.

Compare that with Isaiah the prophet, who has a vision of the glory of Jesus in Is. 6 (John 12:41). His first response to God's holiness was repentance:

Woe is me; I am a man of unclean lips.

He whose living it was to speak God's words. This is what Jesus means to mourn. In Luke 19 when the religious leaders rebuked Him for allowing people to claim Him the Messiah at His triumphal entry we read in v.41

Luke 19:41 As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it ⁴² and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴ They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

Jesus assures us that we who grieve over ours and others sins will be comforted. That's future tense but it can mean both near future and far future. In the far future when we live on the new earth and all sin is removed, we read in Rev. 21:4

'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

The personal griefs we experience from suffering in this life but more importantly the grief over sin will be removed once for all because sin will be gone. Meanwhile in the present God comforts us through the promises in His Word, through prayer and through His people, you and I. Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 1,

³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. ⁶If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. ⁸We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. ⁹Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. ¹⁰He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, ¹¹as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

The religious leaders were more likely to point out and judge people for their sin rather than comfort people in their sin by praying for them and pointing them to the promises in God's Word. This is the kind of blessing Jesus was promising those who believed He was the rightful King and whose rule we can experience even now as we submit to His Word.

Already we can see how freeing these blessings were to Jesus' audience. They had grown up thinking they were not blessed of God, that they had to obey all these meticulous traditions in order for them to be 'approved' of God. But there's another side to that that we need to be careful of as well. Jesus will point out in Matt. 6 that the religious leaders lived for the approval of people and not God. God sees everything we do and knows every thought and motive of our heart. Be aware of the Pharisaic tendency to make ourselves look better than we are so we can impress others. Instead admit our need for God and His ongoing forgiveness through the blood of Jesus.

And let's help people deal with their sins and the consequences of their poor choices instead of criticizing and judging them. Let's be comforters not critics. When we listen to Jesus' words we feel the freedom they bring and the burdens being lifted away. There are 6 more ways He'll tell us we can know we are blessed of God, but a good starting place is being honest about our sin but being assured of His love.

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