

A series of Sermons on  
**The Beatitudes**  
Given by  
Geoff Clinton



I am starting a series of sermons on the Beatitudes and I begin this evening with the first:

**‘Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’**

**Matthew 5:3.**

Before beginning, a word about the Beatitudes in general. The first thing to note is that Jesus, in giving us the Beatitudes, is telling us not so much how to behave or how to conduct ourselves but he is telling us what sort of a person God wants us to be. So the Beatitudes are about our character – and personality – our attitude towards others but especially towards God.

Someone has said (and I regret my notes do not reveal whom) that the Beatitudes are attitudes of being, not of doing. So I suppose one could say that’s why they are called Be-attitudes and not Do-attitudes.

Billy Graham described them – rather delightfully I think – as the “beautiful attitudes” saying that they qualify for the adjective “beautiful” – not so much for the beauty of their language (though that is beauty enough) but for the beauty of their insight and of their incomparable value to us in our walk with God through life in this world and into the next.

They have been called the finest prescription for mental and spiritual health that has ever been given to humanity. Anyway – enough of introduction – time now to concentrate on the Beatitude I’m looking at this evening. And to remind you again of what it is **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”**.

To understand this, or indeed any of the other beatitudes, one needs to understand what the word our Bibles translate as “Blessed” really means – because the original Greek word, ‘makarios’, does not translate exactly into English as “blessed”. Unfortunately, there is no exact equivalent of the Greek word in the English language.

In ordinary speech the Greek word would normally be translated into English as “happy” but, particularly in the context of the Beatitudes, it means much more than the rather casual, feeling of joy which we generally associate with happiness.

One commentator I read thought that the word could best be translated as “blissfully happy” but I’m not too sure that that’s entirely accurate either – particularly as next time I shall be looking at the Beatitude “Blessed are those who mourn” and my experience, sadly very personal in these past few months, is that those who mourn have no desire to generate an air of blissful happiness – but rather the reverse.

No, I think the Greek word 'makarios' can best be translated by understanding the human condition which the word is describing – and what it is describing is the best possible position or condition that one can be in, and which one can benefit from. It implies that the particular circumstance in question is very beneficial for one's life and that one is blessed by it – as for example I might say that I am very blessed to have very supportive children – or I'm very blessed to belong to this church with all the delightful people who belong to it, all of which gives me an inner sense of joy and of well-being. I know how fortunate I am – how blessed I am to be in that position. So I think that "blessed" is the best translation of the original word in the Greek – and that's how it has been translated in our bibles down the years.

Anyway, moving on, Jesus tells us that 'Blessed are the poor in Spirit' so what does "poor in Spirit" mean? First, what doesn't it mean? Well, it doesn't mean and has nothing to do with material poverty. Jesus is not perversely trying to persuade us to feel blessed or privileged if we find ourselves in circumstances of hunger or want. Nor does it mean spiritual poverty in the sense of having a poor faith. There is nothing blessed in a poverty-stricken prayer life or in half hearted worship – or in only a token relationship with God.

So, if poor means none of those things, then what does it mean? In answering that, first one needs to realise that the word 'Poor' is a very relative word – and what I mean by that is best explained by examples.

There are many people in this country who live well below what is called the poverty line – many now dependent on food banks for survival – but the vast majority of these people do have the comfort of a home and somewhere to lay their head at night. Such are their circumstances that they would be looked at with envy as being positively rich by the starving thousands in war torn Gaza – or India – or in many other places in the world where so many people have absolutely nothing.

Then again, there are those who are exceedingly poor and, though they have nowhere near enough, they do have a little and they are determined to survive on that little because their pride prevents them from asking for help. Instead, they struggle on in their hardship – living in misery and isolation with no hope for the future – but very determined to maintain their independence.

Again, compare those people with people who have absolutely nothing – some of them even less than nothing as they're up to their eyes in debt with no hope of getting out of it. They know that they cannot survive on their own – that they cannot survive without help – so they need to throw themselves on the mercy of whoever is prepared to offer them a lifeline and, beyond that, some hope for the future.

That is being truly poor – it's being so poor that you realise that you just cannot exist on your own – and that extreme poverty is what the original Greek word – translated in our Bibles as “poor” actually means. And so to be “poor in Spirit” as Jesus is saying here in this Beatitude we should be – is to come before God with that attitude – with the realisation that we have nothing – that there is nothing we can do – there's nothing we can bring which will enable us to gain entry into the kingdom of Heaven on our own.

We cannot make ourselves worthy of God by our own efforts. We may find that hard to accept – we may think we have a lot going for us – but whatever we may think we have, it is nowhere near enough.

Basically we are all unworthy sinners – some more unworthy than others it is true – but the only way any of us can make ourselves right with God and acceptable to Him is to come before Him with empty hands and outstretched arms, realising our need of Him – realising our poverty – realising that we have nothing and deserve nothing – instead seeking his generosity, his grace, his forgiveness, his love. And, if we do come before Him like that, He welcomes us and gives us what we seek – we have his word that that is what he will do.

And, it's when we come before him like that that we are truly blessed – because, as Jesus tells us in this Beatitude when we come before him like that He guarantees us a place in his Kingdom....“Blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”

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## **Second**

**‘Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted’**

**(Matthew 5:4)**

In the first Beatitude, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall see God’ I noted that Jesus was telling us not so much how to behave or how to conduct ourselves but what sort of person God wants us to be – that the Beatitudes are about our character and our personality – about our attitude towards others and especially towards God. We looked at the definition of the word ‘Blessed’ and that of course is relevant to this Beatitude and to all of the others too because they all begin with that same word ‘blessed’

We discovered that although the original Greek word translated as 'Blessed' can also be translated into English as 'happy', the word does not mean here and is not referring to that fragile, temporary state of happiness which we experience when we enjoy the 'ups' rather than the 'downs' of life – instead it is referring here to something much deeper. It's referring to that state of permanent satisfaction, that feeling of being blessed, which we experience when something in life is truly and lastingly beneficial to us.

When earlier we considered the meaning of the phrase 'Poor in Spirit' we discovered that it had nothing to do with having little or no money, and nothing to do with having little or no faith in God, but instead it's about our realising our total dependence upon God. This means that there's nothing we can do and nothing we can bring to earn our place in His Kingdom – that we need to come before Him in utter humility with empty hands and outstretched arms. We need to realise our poverty, our total dependence upon Him and it is then, when we do that, through His grace and forgiveness that He gives us, in fact guarantees us, a place in His Kingdom.

So, to this Beatitude 'Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted' – but before getting into the depths of that I think it's important for us to realise that Jesus put these Beatitudes in a very definite and carefully thought-out order, each one having a precise place in a progression which brings us to eventual total spiritual maturity. After the first Beatitude which, if we have understood it, means that we are now accepted and received into God's Kingdom, we are ready to move onto the next which tells us we are blessed when we mourn. But that, on the face of it, does seem to be a contradiction – a contradiction of our experience for one thing. We do all have to mourn from time to time and when we do we know only too well that in those times we feel sadness – and grief – and emptiness. So how then is it that in those times we are blessed – as our Lord in this Beatitude assures us that we are?

In answering that we need first to understand what the original Greek word translated as 'mourn' includes, because it's not confined specifically to bereavement – that state of grief experienced when we lose someone very close to us but it extends to any event which may leave one crushed or broken, to any personal experience which brings deep distress or sorrow, to those times when we may descend into the depths of despair or are distraught to the point of tears.

Tears are often regarded as a sign of weakness, though I have to say that I don't regard them as that at all – and, most certainly, Jesus didn't. Genuine tears are, I believe, a natural response to genuine sorrow (or even sometimes to joy) and should not be held back.

Anyway, any event or experience which leaves us in a state of sorrow or brokenness comes within the ambit of this Beatitude. And, whenever such events or experiences occur, leading us to re-act with mourning in the wider sense of the word I have just described, then Jesus assures us— in this Beatitude – that we will be comforted.

This of course raises the question of ‘how’? How does it happen? How are we comforted and by whom? In answering that we need to understand that, sadly, not everyone is comforted. And that’s because this Beatitude is only truly effective for those who have applied to their lives and so live with the benefit of the previous – the first Beatitude – hence the importance of their order which I mentioned earlier. It applies to those who are poor in spirit and who belong to the Kingdom of God – and it applies to them because they know God – they’re close to God and when tragedy or disaster or bereavement strikes they are not alone. They are not alone because on such occasions God is there with them – with his arms around them, sharing their experience, supporting them, strengthening them, loving them, and, above all, assuring them that the events of this world and what happens to our lives in this world, are not hidebound by restriction or finality, but that we all have the hope of a better future, a future life with God, that the present troubles and sorrows of this world are but transient.

If we should have lost someone God is there assuring us that one day we will be reunited with that person in God’s Kingdom. One cannot emphasise enough the value – and the reassurance, that comes with having the company and the comfort of God in times of crisis or distress, in times when we mourn. But there’s another factor which operates in this Beatitude and it’s one which I can give recent personal testimony to, that those who belong to God can, and do, play a very important and significant part in bringing comfort to others on his behalf.

God’s company of believers is truly a family and when tragedy or disaster happens to one of its members then others in God’s family make it their business to gather round, to offer love and friendship and hospitality. That’s what God wants us to do and asks us to do. It’s one of the ways in which this Beatitude works, and from my own recent experience I can confirm how well it works in this church.

There’s one other aspect of this Beatitude which I need to mention which is this, that even some who don’t know God, or who have had little or no regard for Him in the past, when they meet disaster, and particularly bereavement, are moved to turn to God and to look to God for understanding and for hope – and in doing that they also receive comfort from Him as he helps them through their experience. God’s hope is that after their experience is over – if it ever is – that they will remain with Him, believing in Him and trusting Him. Some do, though sadly I fear many do not.

For the rest, for those who never turn to God and so don't know God, this Beatitude is really not for them, and one shudders to think what loneliness, what lack of hope, what lack of comfort they must suffer when times of crisis hit them. Because, in their loneliness, where on earth can true comfort come from?

A final thought on the word 'comfort' because it's a word which in the English language has changed its meaning over the years. In the Bayeux tapestry – that's the embroidered long comic strip of William the Conqueror's success in the battle of Hastings, there's one section which depicts a bishop, sword in hand, prodding the French troops in the backside with it as they face the English. Under this scene are the words sewn into the tapestry 'Bishop Odin comforts his troops'. But, quite self-evidently, whatever comfort he is bringing them isn't our modern idea of comfort because he is causing them pain rather than alleviating it. What comfort means here is that the Bishop is encouraging his troops, strengthening their resolve and getting them to move forward.

This is the same meaning that we find in the comfortable words in the communion service of the 1662 Prayer Book. The words begin: 'Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ sayeth unto all who truly turn to him', and it continues: 'Come unto me all who travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you', an invitation, incidentally, entirely in harmony with our Beatitude. Then there follow three more sentences from the New Testament, each one offering us words of comfort; but what these words are offering us is not comfort in the sense of alleviation from pain but rather comfort in the sense of encouragement and assurance. They are assuring us that God's presence and love are always with us in our lives and that He encourages us to move forward in faith with him despite any pitfalls and setbacks which may confront us on life's journey.

So two different meanings to the word 'comfort' – an old one and a more modern one – but don't be confused by that because I believe that both meanings are equally appropriate in the interpretation of the Beatitude we have been looking at. What really matters is our realisation that this Beatitude assures of God's presence with us whenever we meet tragedy or disaster in life, enabling us, with him, to successfully come through whatever it is that has hit us. May that be the experience of us all.

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## **Third**

**“Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth”**

**Matthew 5:5.**

(This Sermon was given at a special evensong service on the fourth of June held to mark the successful Normandy landings 80 years before)

This evening I'm continuing the series of sermons on the beatitudes which I began at the beginning of the year. Despite that we are celebrating this evening the success of D-Day the beatitudes we're looking at this evening is the third "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth", but I hope that by the time I finish we shall see that this beatitude is not entirely unrelated to the success of D-Day and to the eventual victory in Europe which followed 12 months later.

In our studies so far we have discovered that in the beatitudes Jesus was really turning upside down the commonly accepted values and attitudes of the vast majority of those who live in this world. And those values and attitudes of the worldly minded really haven't changed. So many today are just as materialistic and self-centred as they were in our Lord's day.

Popular opinion, for example, still seems to think that the rich must be happy, and as a consequence of that it's the wish of most people to be wealthy, and that in turn gives rise to the belief that in order to be wealthy one needs to get on in the world, and that in order to get on it's necessary to assert oneself -- to be aggressive and demanding - because that after all, they think, is how the tycoons of this world make their money. They didn't get to where they are today by being kind and generous and compassionate. Well that's the theory, in reality most tycoons aren't as wealthy as they would have you believe and they're certainly not that happy. They're far too concerned about making more money or not losing what they've already got. Human nature left to its own resources doesn't have the best of reputations.

So to the beatitude of the evening which is commonly thought to be the most unbelievable, the most unlikely to be true, of all the beatitudes. Some time ago now a national newspaper held a competition for who could produce the most humorous, ridiculous or outrageous headline. Many entries were submitted and the two which were regarded as among the best was one which stated "income tax reduced to 4p in the £" and another which stated "the meek shall inherit the earth next Wednesday" the latter thought to be obviously as stupidly funny and as ridiculously unlikely as income tax being reduced to 4p in the £.

And that underlines the fact that public opinion generally does not think, if it thinks about it at all, that Jesus's third beatitude can in any way be right, that whatever else the meek may achieve they certainly do not inherit the earth.

On the contrary it's the meek who very often get pushed to the back of the queue and so get very little. No, if Jesus had said that the meek inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, that might be different, but inherit the earth? Sorry, no, that's just contrary to human experience. But those who take the view that Jesus was wrong in what he said in this beatitude are themselves wrong, because what Jesus said is the truth - he always told the truth. He was the truth. "I am the way, the truth and the life" he told us. So let's turn to see how this beatitude is the truth and what Jesus meant by it. To do that we need to study, as we did with the first two beatitudes, the meaning of the words and phrases contained in it.



The first word blessed we've of course already studied when looking at the first two beatitudes and I won't go over that again other than to say that the word in the original Greek basically means happy, but not a temporary or frivolous form of happiness rather a deep and lasting happiness and one that brings us great benefit.

So let's move on to the really critical word of this beatitude, the word meek. Meek, sadly, is a very unfortunate word in the English language in that it sounds very similar to weak and as a result is often confused in its meaning with weak. But it doesn't mean weak at all, nor for that matter does it mean mild or unassuming or timid or shy or feeble or frail or easily pushed around. It doesn't mean being passive or wanting to avoid conflict or disagreement at any price. All common misconceptions of the meaning of the word.

So if it doesn't mean those things what does it mean?

Essentially the Greek word translated as meek in our bibles is a strong word and one used to indicate the restraining or holding of forces in check, and a very good example of its use and one used by the Greeks themselves is in relation to the breaking in of a horse

When a horse is broken in it doesn't become less powerful or less useful but more so, its energy and strength are still there but now they're controlled, disciplined, and channelled in the right direction. Now the horse is at its greatest worth in the service for which it was intended. It's controlled, it's strong, it's meek. It's certainly not weak.

So in human terms meekness as here intended by our Lord means living with the resources and power God has given us but subjecting them to his discipline and control, putting them under his authority, subjecting them to his will not our own. And when that happens we are of the greatest value both to him and to this world in which he has put us. There are many examples in the Bible of those who were meek. Moses certainly was, and so was Paul after his conversion, but the finest example of all was Christ himself. He came to this earth blessed with amazing ability wisdom and power but he used them not to promote himself or for his own benefit but he used them entirely as his Father directed. They were controlled, channelled, used for the good of others, usually demonstrated by a gentleness to those he came into contact with. But when occasion demanded he was fearless and outspoken, as witnessed by his dealings with the money changers in the temple or the hypocritical religious leaders of his day. Jesus was meek, he certainly wasn't weak.

Let's move on to the last part of the beatitude and to the phrase "for they will inherit the earth". What does that mean? And if it means what it seems on the face of it to mean do we really want to inherit the earth? - this war-torn, sin-scarred, polluted world in which we live? What good will it do us? Those in charge of it at the moment don't seem to be having too much success in running it. And if as Paul wrote to the Philippians "Our citizenship is in heaven" should we really be interested in inheriting the earth?

So what did Jesus mean by it? It is believed that in giving us this beatitude Jesus was quoting Psalm 37 verse 11 where David, the writer of this particular Psalm, states "the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace".

Psalm 37 as a whole, all 40 verses of it, draws the distinction between those who are wicked in the world and those who are righteous, and it tells us that God ensures that the wicked, although they may succeed for a while, eventually receive their just punishment, whilst the righteous, if they live according to God's commands and follow the way he has set before them, they will enjoy his reward, and that reward included in the case of the Israelite's, for whom Psalm 37 was written, the land God had promised them, the land of Canaan.

And the implication is, and what God is saying in this Psalm, is that if the people of Israel made themselves subject to God's authority, were obedient to his leading and to his control, in other words if they were meek, then they would not only enjoy the land God promised them but also enjoy peace in it as well.

If on the other hand they ignored God, pleased themselves, did things their own way, went their own way, were no longer subject to his control, that is we're no longer meek, then the result would be that God would no longer protect them and watch over them and they would lose their land as in fact many years later they did.

Now apply all that on a much larger scale ,apply it to the world.

When God created this world and put humankind on it, he made it clear that he wanted his creation to live in unison and harmony with him because that is how life on this earth works, it's the way that Christ himself showed us and taught us. It involves obedience, making ourselves subject to God's authority and control, not doing as we please but doing what pleases him. And that's the very hallmark of those who are meek. And if we live life that way, then God is willing to give us our freedom, he's willing to give us this earth, to run this earth, to enjoy life on this earth, to prosper on this earth, to be blessed in this life as well as in the next.

If on the other hand we go against God's will, reject him and his laws, do as we please regardless of the impact our behaviour has on others, then God will deal with us as we deserve and we will enjoy life neither in this world nor the next.

Those who reject God and go their own way may appear to succeed for a while but eventually they come to grief, as witness the tyrants of history, the Napoleons, the Hitlers, they may have sought to conquer the world and to rule the world but they finished up possessing nothing.

Instead it's the meek, those who live under the authority of God, who are blessed by God in this life and on this earth and in return he's prepared to allow them to enjoy this earth, to govern this earth, to prosper in it and to live in peace.

Thanks be to God for those who bring us peace because they, with God's help enable us to inherit and to enjoy this world.

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## Fourth

### **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled” Matthew 5: 6**

It is a commonly held belief, though not one that I personally subscribe to, that everyone hungers and thirsts for something in this life. Some, sadly, in many parts of the world hunger and thirst for food and water but there are others who hunger and thirst for other things, for success for example or prosperity or security or a loving relationship, there are 101 possibilities.

But there is one hunger and thirst which is shared by almost everyone and that is a hunger and thirst for happiness.

In our previous studies of the beatitudes we have discovered that the word “blessed” means to be deeply and lastingly happy, so the beatitudes are basically recipes for happiness. But you will note that Jesus does not say in any of them: “blessed all those who hunger and thirst for happiness”.

And the reason for that is that happiness can truly only be found as a byproduct in a search for something else. Pursue happiness as an end in itself and you won't find it, you will find instead only emptiness and disappointment, both of which result in unhappiness.

Someone has said: “happiness is not something you find but it's something that finds you”.

And those who do attain true happiness very often do so by concentrating not on their own happiness but on the happiness of others, by concerning themselves with the needs and the welfare of others. And that's particularly the case when what is done is done under the authority of God and with his love radiating through us.

And that is the underlying truth of what Jesus is saying in this beatitude, that lasting, deep happiness comes not from pursuing selfish desires and interests but from the wholehearted pursuit of holiness and goodness which involves living lives centred on God, and doing God's will, and God's will for us is that we love him and love our neighbour.

With that introduction let's have a look at the beatitude in detail taking it word by word or phrase by phrase as we've done before.

The first word “blessed” I've dealt with both when looking at the first three beatitudes and also briefly in what I've already said so far this evening. So let's move on to the phrase: “hunger and thirst”.

Ordinary words in everyday use and so should be given their ordinary everyday meaning one might think, but then, as we've discovered before, it's not always that straightforward, and that's because the depth of meaning in words can so much depend on the circumstances and the experience of the person who hears them.

To give you an example of what I mean: not too many people in this country today know real hunger or real thirst, but go to Palestine and that part of it which is Gaza and there you will find, as our television screens so frequently show, people living with nowhere near sufficient food and nowhere near sufficient water, and that, sadly, is a state of affairs replicated in many other parts of the world.

And the situation wouldn't have been too different in our Lord's time. Palestine then was under foreign occupation and famine would have been a common experience. If you hadn't got a job you had no income and there was no welfare state and no food banks. Shortage of food would have been a regular feature. And there was also a permanent shortage of water. And back then water wasn't available at the turn of a tap.

Real hunger and real thirst would have been a way of life known to almost everyone, either they experienced it themselves or they would have witnessed all around them.

All of which tells us that the hunger and thirst which Jesus means here is not a gentle craving for food or drink, the sort which might be satisfied by a cup of tea and a biscuit or even a good square meal and a pint of beer, but what he is meaning is a desperate hunger and a desperate thirst.

And what Jesus is in effect doing here with these words is challenging his listeners, challenging us, with this question: "How strong is your desire for righteousness?" Is it as strong as a starving man's desire for food or of a man dying of thirst's desire for water? Because a weak or wistful desire for righteousness is nowhere near good enough. We have to want it more than anything else.

So what then is this righteousness that we are so earnestly to strive for? To hunger and thirst for? The Oxford dictionary defines righteousness as being morally good and virtuous but that really does fall far short of what Jesus here meant by the word.

It admittedly is not an easy word to define. And to provide a very simple definition one can probably do no better than to say that it means "right living", but then that begs the question: what does that mean? Well, right living is living as God wants us to live, it's living as he intends that we should live, as he designed us to live in this the world he created.

And he designed us to live, and he wants us to live, lives of goodness, honesty, integrity, purity, love, forgiveness, gentleness, unselfishness, self-control, holiness. I could go on, the list is considerable but it all comprises righteousness. If you want a much shorter description, then it's simply being like Jesus who was and is the epitome, the personification of righteousness.

But there's one other element to it which is most important and which I've yet to mention and that is that righteousness, in addition to all the other things I've mentioned, most essentially includes love and obedience to God.

Love and obedience to God, putting him at the centre of our lives, is the absolute cornerstone of righteousness. It's what motivates us, it's the driving force which leads us to hunger and thirst for all those things which together comprise righteousness. Indeed we have no hope of attaining them without God at the centre of our lives.

It's a truth proved over and over again which many sadly discover far too late in life, and others, more sadly, never discover at all, that a life without God, or with only a passing acquaintance with God, is a life which is never truly fulfilled, there's always a hole in it.

But with God with us and within us the pursuit of righteousness becomes so much easier, our hunger and thirst for it becomes natural, a part of our nature, and as we experience it so our relationship with God deepens and our lives become truly fulfilled. Or as the beatitudes states "filled." Blessed all those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.

Filled with what? Well, filled with God's spirit, the Holy Spirit. But filled also with the certainty of God's love and with his peace and also with happiness. Filled too with that sense of completeness which only a close relationship with God can provide.

I close with a version of the beatitude provided by Selwyn Hughes, who if you've not heard of him before was an excellent Christian teacher and author who died about 20 years ago. And it's his notes that I'm using as the basis for this series on the beatitudes.

His version of the beatitude, rather longer than the original, is this: "deep and lastingly happy are those who ardently strive and desire to become more and more like Jesus and to know God intimately as their father, for they will find a fulfilment and satisfaction that will never vanish or be destroyed".

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More Sermons to follow....