

People of the Future

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First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — August 9, 2015

Matthew 5:1-16 NIV

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach 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 be shown mercy.

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

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

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

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

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."



Luke 6:17-31 NIV

[Jesus] went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by evil spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

Looking at his disciples, he said:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

"Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

"Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.

"Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.

"Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

"Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you."

I'm sure we're all familiar with the Beatitudes, because these words of Jesus which open his "Sermon on the Mount" are among the best-known passages of the Bible, along with some others such as the Ten Commandments, the 23rd Psalm, and the Lord's Prayer. Perhaps you memorized the Beatitudes as a child in

Sunday school. I recall that, as a first-grader in Sunday school, I recited them to my teacher and was given a pencil with the Beatitudes printed on it as my prize.

What I didn't realize, until I had been speaking from this pulpit for a few months, was that the Beatitudes are the subject of the stained glass windows in this auditorium. So I thought it would be an interesting exercise to use our windows to illustrate Jesus' teaching. Perhaps someone has done this before, and if so I hope my treatment will offer a different slant.

I will get to the windows in a moment. First, though, what are the Beatitudes? The name comes from the Latin word for "blesséd," which is the first word in each of these pronouncements of Jesus. This kind of saying, "Blesséd is this one or that one," is a common Hebrew pronouncement. We find it, for example, in the First Psalm, which we recited earlier: "Blesséd is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked . . ." "Beatitudes" like this occur elsewhere, as in Proverbs 28:14, "Blesséd is the man who fears the LORD always"; or in Psalm 127: 4, "Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blesséd is the man whose quiver is full of them."

Because the New Testament writers, like Jesus, were all Jews, we find similar statements in the New Testament. James 1:12 states, "Blesséd is the man who endures trial," and the Revelation to John opens with these words: "Blesséd is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near" (1:3). Jesus didn't invent the Beatitude; he and his apostles used a form of speech that was well known to the people they spoke to.

But Jesus used the beatitude in a new way. To understand how, we need to go back to the very first announcement he made when he began to preach. Mark records the event in the first chapter of his gospel: "After John [the Baptist] was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'" (Mark 1:14-15). A new reality has entered the human scene; God is on the move, through Jesus of Nazareth, to renew his creation, to reestablish his kingdom in the affairs of men and nations. The life of God's kingdom is a reality unfolding in the midst of human culture corrupted by indifference to God and rebellion against his plan. Through Jesus, the Creator is calling people into his restored family. Whoever responds to this call is *blesséd*, because they're the *people of the future* and not the people of the system that's on its way out. Things may be tough now, Jesus recognizes, but in God's new order things will be different. Therefore — *Blesséd!*

That word, *blesséd*, is how most English versions of the Bible render the Greek word *makarios* (plural *makarioi*) in the Beatitudes, and the Hebrew word *'ashrei* of the Old Testament as in the First Psalm. To us, the word *blesséd* is a religious-sounding word, a kind of holy "pat on the back." But these words really have a plain meaning for everyday life. To call someone *blesséd* is like saying they're "happy," or better, that they've been given something special to delight in. A young woman I know was recently promoted to a new position in the organization she works for, and given a greater responsibility. So her friends on Facebook have been saying, "Congratulations!" That's sort of what the Bible means when it calls someone *blesséd*. Jesus, in the Beatitudes, is saying to his followers, "Congratulations!" — not because of what they have right now, but because of what they will know and experience as God's kingdom unfolds for them.



That, by the way, brings up another key point about the Beatitudes. Let's read those first verses of Matthew 5 again: "When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach *them* . . ." We have this image of Jesus standing on the hillside,

addressing a great crowd of people who had followed him around Galilee. But read the fine print. When Jesus pronounced the Beatitudes he was speaking not to the crowds but *to his disciples*, the people he had specially called to join him in his mission of proclaiming the rule of God. And, by the way, notice another fine point: Jesus *sat down* to teach, while his hearers stood. In the ancient world chairs weren't common; the teacher had the place of honor, the seat, while his audience stood out of respect. Today we've got it all turned around. If, as a Christian Church, we want to do things the Bible way, then I should sit during the sermon and you should stand! (Just kidding.)

Let's look, then, at the Beatitudes as represented by the windows in our church auditorium. The first thing we notice is that the picture windows, starting on the east wall and working around to the south wall, aren't in the order of the Beatitudes. Another odd thing is that, in most cases, the Beatitude on the bottom part doesn't seem to go with the picture! It looks like at one time the windows were worked on and the wrong Scripture verses were put back under them. (Perhaps someone here knows about this.) So in some cases it's hard to decide which window goes with which Beatitude. We'll take the windows in their biblical order, doing my best to match the stained glass image with the Beatitude that really goes with it. Windows 1 and 2 don't seem to go with a Beatitude; but perhaps window 2, which seems to depict a modern preacher with a Bible, goes with the verse under window 7 on the south wall: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).



Blesséd are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Window 3, on the east wall, depicts a kind of unassuming person, which could represent this Beatitude. What does it mean to be "poor in spirit"? It doesn't mean to be downcast in spirit, like a kind of "sad sack" or someone with a cloud hovering above his head. My father, when preaching, used to say this Beatitude means "blesséd are those who feel their spiritual need" — people who sense their need to be connected to the Lord. I think that's part of it, but let's remember the outcome from being "poor in spirit," which is to receive and live in God's kingdom. Being part of God's new creation — the renewal of his once-good, but now corrupted, world — is no occasion for sadness but for joy and celebration. The

person who's self-satisfied, proud, and complacent isn't inclined to make the adjustment needed for living under God's rule. But those who are "poor in spirit" are ready for change, eager to receive everything God has for them. So, Jesus says, *they are the blesséd*. Congratulations to them! Will the Lord congratulate you and me because he finds we're open to what he wants to do in our lives?

I call your attention to one further detail here. Jesus, in this Beatitude, isn't talking about "heaven" as someplace far removed from our life here on earth. The Jewish people, to this day, are often careful not to speak casually about God, so they use a substitute term such as "the name," "the Power," or "heaven." For example, in Jesus' parable of the "prodigal son" the returning son tells his father, "I have sinned against heaven and before you" (Luke 15:21), meaning, "I have sinned against God." Matthew's Gospel, which some scholars regard as having a more Jewish flavor than the others, uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" where the other Gospels have "kingdom of God." The two expressions mean the same thing — the Lord's emerging presence and purpose in the affairs of men and women. The "kingdom of heaven" isn't off somewhere else; it's *heaven coming to earth*.

Blesséd are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. This Beatitude is represented by window 5, on the east wall, showing a mourner reflecting over a coffin. Perhaps, since the figure is dressed in blue, she represents the Virgin Mary, although her son Jesus was not placed in such a coffin but in a rock-hewn tomb. But I believe the mourning, or grief, Jesus speaks of here is more than the sad feeling we have when a loved one departs. In our world there is so much over which we, as believers, are grieved — and I don't have to elaborate on recent reports in the news to stress that point. We mourn, we grieve, over the state of our world, the sad end that awaits those who disregard the Word of the Lord, and the awful harm they do to others. But, declares Messiah Jesus, we who grieve are *blesséd* because we know that God is on the move to bring his wayward universe back into line. And, because Jesus has risen from the dead, we who belong to him await what the Lord will do for us, in the resurrection of our body at the final restoration of all things.

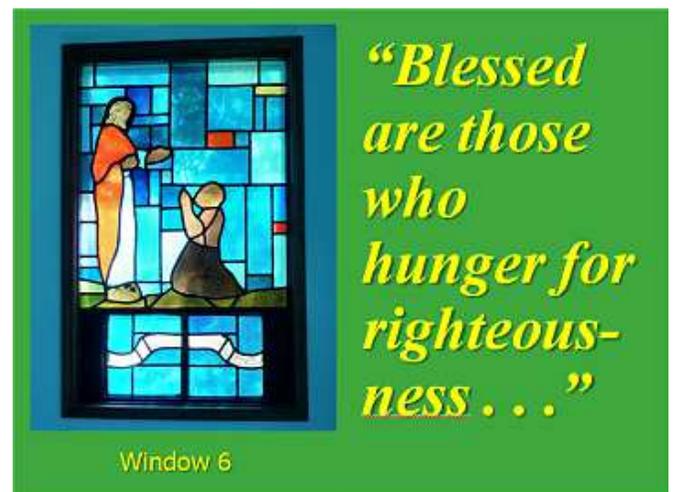


Blesséd are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. This Beatitude seems to be the subject of window 4, on the east wall, although it's labeled "Blesséd are the pure in heart." Here we see a figure kneeling in submission before the Lord Jesus. And that's a clue to what real meekness is. Being meek doesn't mean making yourself into a doormat; it means yielding to the will and purpose of God in your life, even if that makes you a formidable, even terrifying person in the sight of others who don't know the Lord. Think of Bible figures who were meek before the Lord but a power God's enemies had to reckon with — people like Moses, David, the apostles Peter and Paul, and the Lord Jesus himself. Such people, because they live responsibly, obedient to

God's plan for human life, will eventually take over this earth in spite of all the bluster and violence of those who deny God's way. In this Beatitude, Jesus is quoting Psalm 37:11, "But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace," or shalom — well-being, success, prosperity. Therefore, Jesus reminds us, they're happy — "Blesséd are the meek." Will the Lord congratulate us because he finds us determined to follow his will in all things?

Blesséd are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Here we're showing window 6, on the east wall. Although the Beatitude under this window says, "Blesséd are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake," I believe that's a mistake because, as we shall see, that verse fits a different window.

Here the Lord is offering a loaf of bread to a hungry person begging for it. Bread, in the Bible, can be a symbol for the Word of God, especially as revealed in Jesus who says, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:48). It is



not the physically hungry upon whom Jesus pronounces his blessing, but those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” meaning God’s justice and his faithfulness to the covenant he has made with his people. These people are happy, satisfied because the Lord will fill them — not with food and drink but with the “righteousness” for which they hunger, their own faithfulness to the purposes of God in his world. Congratulations to you and me, if we hunger for the justice of God to be revealed!



Blesséd are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Window 7, the first window on the south wall, is captioned “Come unto Me . . .” but I think it fits this Beatitude. The stained glass shows a worshiper receiving the absolution, or mercy, of the Lord Jesus. Over and over the New Testament stresses the requirement that we, as followers of Jesus, must show mercy and forgiveness to those who have offended us if we are to be forgiven ourselves. “Forgive us our debts,” Jesus taught us to pray, “as we forgive our debtors.” There is nothing that blocks the growth of our faith, and our happiness, more than a resentful, unforgiving, unmerciful heart. A book recently published by author Amy Morin is

entitled *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don’t Do*, and at the top of her list is that strong people refuse to feel sorry for themselves. Dwelling on the wrongs done to us is the surest way to be “unblesséd,” because that blocks the mercy we may receive from our Father. To show kindness and mercy to others is how we reflect God’s own character in our character. As Jesus states, “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). Congratulations to you and me, then, if we display this *blesséd* quality in our lives.

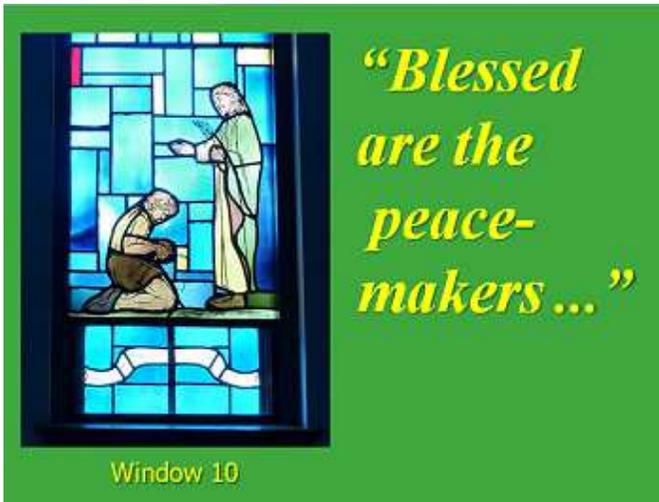
Blesséd are the pure in heart, for they will see God. We’re looking at window 8, the second on the south wall. Oddly enough, the Scripture verse below this window is the same as the Beatitude under the window for those who mourn, but I’m sure that’s an error. Here the stained-glass figure is looking up to the Lord in prayerful devotion. What does this Beatitude really mean? In the nineteenth century the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote a book entitled *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, and that title kind of sums it up. To be pure in heart doesn’t mean we’re totally sinless, or have nothing but the purest thoughts and feelings. In the Bible the “heart” doesn’t refer to our feelings, but stands for our intentions, our purposes, our motivations. To have a pure heart is to be single-minded, to have one purpose in life. We can’t see God with our eyes, but when our inward focus is to seek him above all else we may get *insight* into his reality, the glory of the Creator of all things, and be *blesséd* as a result.



Blesséd are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. We turn here to window 10, last window on the south wall, which is captioned “Blessed are the merciful.” But here a kneeling figure is bending a spear as the Lord offers the olive branch of peace. The prophet Micah says, “The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem . . . They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore” (Micah 4:2-3).

But “peace,” in the Bible, is more than just the absence of warfare and strife. Peace is *shalom*, the state of health, prosperity, life in its fullest satisfactions. Those who contribute to this kind of peace, in the lives of whomever they touch, are the *blesséd* peacemakers whom God is pleased to call his own children. And I cannot but recall another point my father made when preaching on this Beatitude: It’s not the *peacekeepers*

whom Jesus commends, but the *peacemakers!* To just stay out of the fray and sit by when the peace of others is disturbed is not enough. The sons and daughters of God are those who step into a situation of conflict and, through the wisdom of the Word of God, help to bring about reconciliation and healing.



Blesséd are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Our final Beatitude is shown in window 9, on the south wall, and again the verse for this window really belongs on window 6. For some reason the Beatitudes have been switched between the two, because in this window we see an executioner with his ax, and the captive kneeling at the block. Obviously this is not one hungering for righteousness, as the verse below it says, but one persecuted for his righteousness.

Jesus adds to this Beatitude: “Blesséd are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same

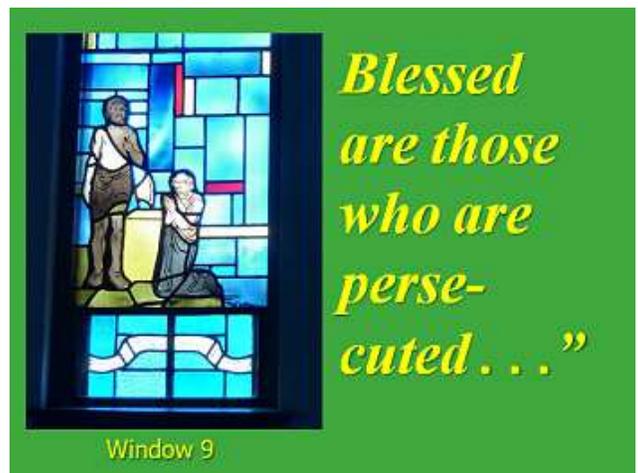
way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” We know that it’s becoming more difficult in our nation to maintain a public Christian witness, but in some parts of the world people who name the name of Messiah Jesus are under severe persecution and even in danger of death. Jesus knew that’s how it would be. Entrenched evil powers in this world are severely threatened by the gospel of the kingdom of God, for that gospel calls into question every authority that would set itself up against the rule of God. It was William Penn who said, “A people that will not be governed by God will be governed by tyrants,” and his words are proved true time and again. Jesus went to his cross because, in his life and ministry, the unsettling, upsetting rule of God was manifested and those with a vested interest in the *status quo* couldn’t handle it. And Jesus’ followers, likewise, paid with their lives for their witness to the entrance of God’s new creation in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

We don’t consider it a very *blesséd* state, do we, to be insulted, discounted, regarded as some kind of weirdo because we believe in Messiah Jesus and his resurrection.

Yet Jesus pronounces a Beatitude over us if that’s what we have to endure. Our “payoff” is the same as for those Jesus blesses in the first Beatitude: “Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” To live in heaven-come-to-earth — to know God as our Father and Jesus as our Deliverer, and to conduct ourselves in accordance with the Word of God come what may — is a blessing for all who love God. Do you and I have a strong enough commitment to the ways of God that he can say to us, “Congratulations, you’re part of my plan for this world I love”?

Yes, in the Beatitudes Jesus is talking about the *people of the future*, *blesséd* because the time to come belongs to them and not to those who deny the plan and purpose of God. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus brings this out in a different version of the Beatitudes, in what’s called the “Sermon on the Plain”:

- “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
- “Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.
- “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.



"Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.

<i>Blessed!</i>	<i>Woe!</i>
The Poor	The Rich
The Hungry	The Well Fed
Those Who Weep	Those Who Laugh
The Hated	The Admired

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.

"Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.

"Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

"Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets" (Luke 6:20-27).

The tables are turning; those who are heavily invested in the corrupt world that is passing away are

headed for a big letdown. History is swinging in the direction of the kingdom of God, as the resurrection life of Jesus works its way through human affairs. That's the witness of the New Testament. And we don't want to be on the wrong side of that chart, do we?

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