

5th Sunday after Epiphany

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February 8, 2026

Matthew 5:1-12 And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. ² Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying: ³ "Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed *are* those who mourn, For they shall be comforted. ⁵ Blessed *are* the meek, For they shall inherit the earth. ⁶ Blessed *are* those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled. ⁷ Blessed *are* the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy. ⁸ Blessed *are* the pure in heart, For they shall see God. ⁹ Blessed *are* the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God. ¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The Beatitudes are His Blessing to those Who Do not Deserve It

Perspective can make all the difference. Consider the following opposite perspectives:

My husband never helps with the dishes. My husband is always busy mowing the lawn and fixing things.

Jesus condemns all those who won't believe in him. Everyone deserves hell, but Jesus saves those who believe in him.

These sentences express similar truths but from very different perspectives.

From the wrong perspective the beatitudes are a list of demands we cannot possibly do and would make our life miserable trying to fulfill them. From the right perspective they are Jesus gracious gift to people who are hungry, poor, tired and filled with sorrow.

In order to help you understand these beatitudes properly we are going to discuss four statements about the beatitudes. Four truths that Jesus himself teaches in these beatitudes. Four truths which when they are understood and acceptable will make it clear that these beatitudes are not law. They are not a standard we have to live up to, but they are a gracious promise from Christ. Four truths which will make certain that you never again misunderstand the beatitudes.

1. All the conditions and blessings of the beatitudes are spiritual

Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. - The poor are those who have nothing to give the Lord for their salvation. It is as though all men are lined up before God and the "wealthy" come and say to the Lord here are my great works by which I have earned heaven. Then come

the poor and say to the Lord I have nothing and can give you nothing by which to earn my salvation. And the Lord gives the riches of the kingdom to those who claim poverty.

Thus, the first of the four truths is this that all the conditions and blessings are spiritual. Each beatitude consists of a condition, eg “the poor,” and a blessing, eg “the kingdom of God.” Both of these parts are always spiritual.

Again and again the condition you are supposed to be is a spiritual condition. It is a spiritual problem and the thing that is received is a spiritual blessing.

This is the first mistake that many make. They assume that they need to win their way to heaven. They assume that if they can achieve what Jesus says here then they will receive the blessing. They proceed to take a vow of poverty, or they fast exceedingly, or they give up all joy in this world, and they think they have thereby fulfilled the condition part of the beatitude and therefore the blessing is theirs.

But they have completely missed the point. For it is not a lack of earthly wealth that Jesus speaks about but a poverty of the spirit. The poor is the spirit that claims nothing before God but acknowledges that I am filth in his presences. Christ gives the riches of the kingdom to these poor, so then the difference is Christ not us.

David reminds us in Psalm 34:18 **The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit.**

Taking a vow of poverty means nothing to God, humbling our hearts so that we admit we are poor in spirit, this is pleasing in God’s sight.

2. The condition that Jesus describes in the first four beatitudes is what we already are

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled. To hunger here means to lack, to lack righteousness, to lack peace, to lack contentment. We lost the image of God and that loss is a deep ache within us. We hate ourselves because we know that we are not what we are supposed to be. We hunger for righteousness.

The second truth is that the condition that Jesus describes in each of the beatitudes is what we already are.

When the first truth is understood, it is spiritual poverty, then the second truth follows naturally. I already am poor, and hungry. These are not things that we need to work at to achieve, for there is no lack of spiritual poverty or hunger in our hearts. Jesus only calls us to recognize the truth of who we are.

When Jesus says, “Blessed are you poor,” he is not dividing the crowd but describing it.

Hunger is never anything you strive for. You don't go out and work at being hungry. Hunger is something that happens to you because you do not have the food you need. Likewise spiritual hunger comes about because you lack the righteousness which you should have done.

In fact many of the beatitudes describe a lack, not an act.

Blessed are the poor – ie the ones who lack a rich spiritual life

Blessed are the hungry – ie the ones who lack the righteousness that would give you a satisfying life

Blessed are those who mourn – ie the ones who lack any true joy in this world

Into this lack Christ comes and by His grace gives what we are missing. You are poor and I give you the riches of the kingdom of God. You are hunger and I will satisfy you with my righteousness. You are sad I will give you joy in life everlasting. We are poor. Christ fills us with his riches.

3. The condition does not make you worthy of the blessings

Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted. - The weeping Christ describes here is not the outward stern face, or a life lived avoiding all human joy. This is a mourning of the soul. This is the sorrow that never fully leaves our soul because we live in a world of sin. This is the same sorrow that even caused Christ to weep at the death of Lazarus.

This condition does not make us worthy of the blessing.

Again, many mistake the beatitudes as though God is saying if you suffer this now then you will receive this later, as though the condition makes us worthy of the blessing. But this is pure nonsense. If I go without food now does that make me worthy of food later? If I eat now does this make me unworthy of eating later? What if your child says to you, I'm going to skip supper so then I deserve ice cream later. Does skipping supper make you worthy of ice cream? Certainly not.

Consider the evilness of Jesus woes if you view the condition as making you worthy of the blessing. Do we really worship a God who punished people just for being happy? No of course not. We all deserve to suffer because of our sin, not based on our earthly wealth or happiness.

The truth that Jesus lays at our feet here is that we all poor and hungry and mourning and he in his grace has come to give us riches and fill us with good things and make us to rejoice.

The distinction is not that the hungry deserve to be filled, the difference is Christ. He fills us who are hungry.

4. But now Christ is risen from the dead

The fourth statement comes not from our gospel reading but from 1 Cor 15

1 Cor 15:14 – 20 If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up--if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! . . . If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Our only hope is in Christ who rose from the dead.

If we have to somehow find a way to make ourselves poor in spirit, we will not attain the blessing. If we have to find a way to make sure we are always sad and mourning, then there is no hope for us. And if it is such that the kingdom of heaven belongs then why did Christ die?

But the truth is that Christ is risen from the dead. What does this mean except that first He died for our sins. If he died for sinners, then it is to sinners that his righteousness is given not to those who prove themselves worthy. And that then second, he rose. And if He rose our sins have been left behind and we have received all these blessings which he in his grace came to bring to us who are poor, and hungry, and naked and sorrowful.

We are empty and he fills us with His gifts by His grace.

Amen.