

Jesus Reveals the True Blessed State

Dear Friends,

Apologies for sending the July 31 Gleanings late.

Jesus started His Sermon on the Mount with a series of "Blessed" teachings, sometimes called the "Beatitudes." His description of the "Blessed" people differs widely from the qualities highly prized in the modern mind, sadly often including modern professing believers. In fact, Jesus' blessings almost mirror the opposite traits to those most favored by contemporary Christians.

Jesus preached His "Sermon on the Mount" to His disciples, not to a mixed multitude. (Matthew 5:1 KJV). Increasingly as I teach and as I reflect on my own habits, I refer to the "Sermon on the Mount lifestyle." Several times in Romans and Galatians Paul refers to the "righteousness of faith," a right or righteous habit of life, defined and directed by true Biblical faith, not by a rigid set of rules. In the end, this righteousness begins in the heart and mind, so it is far more comprehensive than a conduct directed by a set of rules, however good those rules may be. Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount lifestyle" begins with a mindset that honors the traits He emphasized in these "Blessed" teachings. His lifestyle teaching in this sermon, Matthew 5-7, is admittedly intimidating. So it should be. But the same Jesus who taught this lifestyle stands at the ready to help each of us practice what He taught us in the sermon. Can I live that lifestyle on my own? Not at all. Can I live it with His help? Yes, I can. Attaining it will be a lifelong pursuit. It will merge with Paul's "[righteousness which is of faith]" teaching in every detail. Biblical faith always motivates and empowers righteous conduct. The righteousness of faith is far more life-encompassing than any righteous lifestyle defined by a fixed set of rules. Various Christians across the centuries have observed a basic truth of this lifestyle. The law demands obedience, but it gives us no assistance in attaining its demands. Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount shows us His own life as our example, and He then provides the Holy Spirit as our abiding guide and helper to accomplish this way of living.

Thank the Lord for His loving grace and for His righteous Helper in our pursuit of a true "Sermon on the Mount lifestyle."

Lord bless,

Joe Holder

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[And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.] (Matthew 5:1-11 KJV)

Having spent some time reflecting on Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6, let's now turn to the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Our first thought, and a key anchor to direct our understanding of the complete message, appears in Verse 1. Jesus noted the multitudes, but He had a special message for His disciples, so he left the multitude, went to an isolated mountain area. When the disciples gathered with Him, he taught them what we know as the "Sermon on the Mount." Therefore, we should approach our study of the Sermon on the Mount as His message to disciples, to us if we long to be numbered in that class.

Recently I've enjoyed some time in my daily reflections on Scripture's use of the symbol of God, or Jesus, as Shepherd, and His people as His sheep. Modern Christians have forgotten the most basic principle of ancient shepherding. Sheep do not choose their shepherd. The shepherd chooses the sheep he wants to include in his fold, and he buys them. The majority, likely well over ninety percent, of Scripture is devoted to teaching us how to be obedient and faithful sheep in our Lord's "fold." When the modern Christian reads Scripture as if it were God's roadmap for lost sinners to find their way to heaven, they rob themselves and the people they teach of this wealth of instruction on how to be a faithful and good sheep in the Lord's sheepfold. Consequently, you will often observe people quite sincerely claiming to be believers, but their lifestyle utterly fails to measure up to Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" ethics. And they think nothing of this failure. The only thing that matters with them is the superficial claim that they are members of Jesus' fold, though they insist on living their lives, according to their will and way, rejecting the Good Shepherd's blood-bought position of rule over every aspect of their lives. The Shepherd directs the sheep; the sheep don't demand that the Shepherd follow them wherever they wish to go. But a significant portion of modern believers reject this idea outright.

Jesus' "Blessed" statements at the beginning of the Sermon, if carefully studied, shock the carnal professing believer. Jesus pronounced His personal blessing on the various classes of people, whose description puts them in a class these people despise. Consider each descriptive term Jesus chose for His special blessing.

1. ... “[Poor in spirit.]” For modern folks, “Poor in spirit” isn’t the desired “Self-image” one should strive to attain. In fact, it is high on their despised list. They work not to be poor in spirit.

2 ... [“Mourners].” This is a mystery to the modern mind. They seek to avoid mourning, not think of it as a blessed state of mind. Do not stereotype mourning as relating only to the death of a loved one. We mourn many things in life, and most of the things the modern mind strives to attain in their pursuit of pride are the very things the faithful believer mourns. He seeks to avoid, not pursue them. An old hymn’s leading thought makes this point, “{{Voice=IVONA Joey22}}Oh give me Lord my sins to mourn{{/voice}}.” .

3 ... [“Meek.”] Most contemporary believers have no idea what “Meek” even means. Try asking someone, even a professing believer, to define “Meek.” They will give you a quizzical look, scratch their head, and allow their imagination to chase in three or four directions all at the same time, never remotely defining the word or the trait.

Louw-Nida defines the Greek word translated “Meek” in this verse as “pertaining to being gentle and mild.” How would the modern believer describe this trait? “Boring!”

4 ... [“They which do hunger and thirst after righteousness.”] Human carnal pride refuses to acknowledge to anyone that they long for—hunger or thirst after—anything, much less the quality of righteousness as Jesus described—and lived—that trait as our example.

5. ... [“The merciful.”] Again, contemporary professing Christians join the dominant attitude of the culture. When someone fails, he likely deserves every scornful word and attitude you give him. Mercy? No way. The modern mind doesn’t judge what people do, but what they are discovered doing that is objectionable. If you do anything wrong and get away with it, more power to you.

6. ... [“Pure in heart.”] Likely the first word that contemporary people would use to describe this person is “Boring.”

7. ... [“Peacemakers.”] Listen to the evening news. It is seldom news. It is more often the editorial personal opinion of the newscaster. The various networks are fiercely divided. If you consider yourself politically “Liberal,” by all means listen to the news only on Network A. And if you regard yourself as politically “Conservative,” by all means listen only to the news reports on Network B. Regardless the networks, “A” or “B,” you hear hostile attacks against the other side. And people love it and celebrate their favored network’s hostile digs at the other side. I am often heartbroken as I observe very sincere professing Christians among the loudest warriors for one or the other “Side” in the various political and social divides that are presently ripping our culture apart at the seams.

God’s people, faithful “Sermon on the Mount” kind of believers, invest their heart and soul in peacemaking, not war. They don’t look for carnal causes to rationalize war with words or worse. They look for ways to promote peace, especially among believers.

8. ... The [“Persecuted for righteousness’ sake.”] Although Christians in many countries are persecuted today, believers in our country have long enjoyed freedom from overt torture kinds of persecution. However, subtle persecution with words occurs routinely. And sadly often the word assault is voiced the loudest by professing believers of a different belief.

9. ... Who are those whom men “[revile and persecute]...[and say all manner of evil against you falsely]”? Listen to the coffee chatter of many professing believers. They eagerly join the evil words against anyone of the opposite view to theirs. Blessed? They rather regard anyone of a different view as deserving every harsh word spoken against them.

As I read this assessment of our culture, especially as professing believers work to fit into that culture, not stand apart from it as the Lord’s “Light,” His “City on a hill,” I struggle with discouragement. I long to see a different lifestyle in believers, a lifestyle that imitates Jesus and his Sermon on the Mount conduct, rather than striving to imitate this dark twisted world and its hatred of the meek and mild Jesus. Let’s review these classes of people and highlight the “Sermon on the Mount” honor of them and of their conduct.

1. The poor in spirit. If we regard Scripture’s frequent symbol of us, the Lord’s people, as sheep, and He as our Shepherd, this trait becomes obvious and honorable. He is our Shepherd. Our task is not to challenge Him or to ignore Him, but to obey Him, to be a faithful “Sheep” in His fold, a sheep that strives to honor Him and to follow Him. We resign pride and promote faith to pursue this goal.
2. The mourners. The more we truly learn the reality of Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” lifestyle the more we long to practice it, and the more we realize our failures. We so long to practice that way of living that we often grieve—“Mourn”—our failures.
3. The meek. Memorize the definition I cited above, “pertaining to being gentle and mild.” Do we strive to avoid this lifestyle or to cultivate it? When we talk about our latest political ideas or whatever stokes our current emotional fires, do we strive to practice it or to ignore it? One state of mind is blessed; one is not.
4. Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Do we labor to increase our “Sermon on the Mount” lifestyle? Or think we’ve attained all the “Religion” we want or need? If we truly learn the lifestyle Jesus taught in this message, and if we regard it as our only path to glorify and to honor Him in how we live, we will develop an insatiable hunger/thirst for more, not dismiss it as unattainable and choose our own way, often exemplified by the dark “Dog-eat-dog” world around us.
5. The merciful. Think about the last time another believer said or did something that really offended you. Do you dwell on that offense and find yourself distancing yourself from that person? Or do you think of the event and the person with true mercy and file it in the “Forgotten” folder of your mind? How much do I need the Lord’s mercy? Can I survive without it? My goal should be to show that much mercy toward my brothers and sisters in Christ, not hold onto grudges.
6. The pure in heart. How well might each of us measure up to Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” lifestyle if we had to face that measure against our deepest most secret thoughts? Ah, Lord forgive! I can think of nothing that so powerfully nudges me to keep my focus on my own conduct and to strive to grow closer to my Lord and to His people.
7. The peacemakers. Apply this quality to your conduct 1) in church, 2) in your family, and 3) in your workplace. If the people who know you and your conduct best were to offer a one word description of

you, would this word be the first to enter their mind? The Lord “Blesses” the peacemaker conduct, not the warrior way. In Ephesians 6:12, Paul highlights the identity of the faithful believer’s true adversary. And it is not my brother or my sister in church, my family, or my boss in the workplace. It is those dark thoughts and emotions that rise in my own mind. In fact, a careful study of the items of the Christian warfare in this context suggests that our faithful Christian battle should occur within our mind, not against our brothers and sister. With them, are we living up to Jesus’ “Peacemaker’s” blessed quality?

8. The persecuted for righteousness’ sake. Before we can be persecuted for our faith and for our righteous conduct, we must practice it with sufficient conviction and consistency that the people around us know about our faith. Do we practice Jesus’ lifestyle that we see in this message so faithfully that people know and see it when they think of us? In our family? On the job?

9. The highly criticized and despised. If we truly live in the shadow of Jesus and His lifestyle, rest assured, we shall be the recipient of high criticism and spite from others. What is our goal? To follow the habits of the loudest and most rancorous voice we know? Or to imitate Jesus when we are talking about politics or health or any other issue for that matter?

If we were to anticipate Jesus’ blessings in our life, as measured by His teaching in these verses, do we have grounds to expect His blessings? Or must we bow our head and heart in realization that we failed in practicing and in living by them? The real “Sermon on the Mount” lifestyle is rightly intimidating and daunting. We can only grow its habits with the Lord’s help and grace, but that grace He only extends to His child who longs to live it day in and day out. Is this lifestyle our chief aim in life? Or is our chief aim to see one political party rule over the other, or one political candidate to win over another? Does Jesus and this lifestyle ignite our strongest fires of emotion and commitment? Or must His way, clearly explained and described in this sermon, always compete in our minds for time and our personal energy?

If I honestly apply these questions to myself, I must answer in the words of a wise and godly man who, when asked, “Sir, are you a Christian?” He replied, “The more I study the life of Jesus and the life He lived—and taught me to live, I must confess that I’m not a Christian, but I long to be one.” Lord help us each to grow stronger in this path for our lives.

Elder Joe Holder