

## **Attitude Adjustment (Beatitudes)**

# **Blessed: The Word and the Relationship**

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### **Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)**

*Attitude Adjustment.* Blessed: The Word and the Relationship

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### **Background Notes**

**Key Scripture Texts:** Overview of Matthew 5:1-16 with emphasis on Matthew 5:1-2, 13-16

### **The Text**

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, <sup>2</sup> and he began to teach them, saying:

<sup>3</sup> "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup> Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

<sup>8</sup> Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup> Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

<sup>10</sup> Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

<sup>13</sup> "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.

<sup>14</sup> "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:1-16).

### **Introduction**

We say a blessing over our food, and bless the hands who prepared it. We sing about blessed assurance, and hope for showers of blessing. With the psalmist we offer praise, "Bless the Lord O my soul and forget not all His benefits." For our nation we give petition, "God bless America, land that I love." Wrapped with the priestly comfort of Aaron, we receive his words, "The Lord bless you and keep you." Treated to a table rich with food, we are supposed to say that we are blessed to have more than enough food to eat. Or we are blessed by a happy, healthy family, with lots of lively children and grandchildren running around at Thanksgiving. Even admittedly trivial daily details — avoiding traffic on the way to an important appointment — we think about as a special blessing. Of course there were others who missed theirs.

Ironically, blessings don't seem terribly democratic (small "d"! ). Good Christians don't want to talk about "luck," and so they say "blessed" instead. Except the distribution of blessings seems rationed at times, and we don't know always know on what basis that happens. The lyrics, "Blessings," by Laura Story, attempt to answer the stubborn doubts. Yes, "We pray for blessings..." and they include "peace, comfort for family, protection while we sleep..." and such things. But then there are plenty of "what if's" that involve "raindrops, tears, sleepless nights, and trials..." For them we require "wisdom" to see blessings as God's "mercy in disguise."

Jesus once said that our Father in heaven "...causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" ("Matthew 5:45), and those things happen to those who are our enemies as well as our friends.

Not all blessings arrive during this life, and so the ancient writers often spoke of the *afterlife* as the realm of the blessed. Thinkers like Augustine referred to our experience beyond death as involving “the beatific vision of God” — that is, the *blessed* vision of God. Our most blessed condition happens when we are fully in the presence of God and see Him face to face (Revelation 14:13).

In the meantime, we are told in Scripture, the *blessings* which make us *blessed* arrive by God’s grace, His never-ending gift that just keeps on giving. An excursion through the biblical text uncovers very early references to God declaring human beings as blessed. “And God blessed them...” appears in Genesis 1 when God made the world. The history of God’s ancient people, Israel, begins with a blessing on father Abraham (Genesis 12). Jacob, the ancestor of the twelve tribes, blesses all of his sons before his death (Genesis 49). In the New Testament, we find the familiar words spoken to Mary, the mother of our Lord: “Blessed are you among women” (Luke 1:42).

In our new study which begins this week, we focus on a central text in the teaching of Jesus, commonly called “The Beatitudes.” Two versions appear in the Gospels: 1) Matthew 5:3-12; 2) Luke 6:20b-23. The *Matthew* version will be our focus for this series, with reference to Luke’s version when differences stand out. As we will discuss below, these “blessed” sayings belong to the larger unit known as “The Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew’s account, and “The Sermon on the Plain” in the case of *Luke*. Also contained within the circle of this same instruction are the two sayings about *salt* and *light* (Matthew 5:13-16) which have close connections to the experience of the blessed life.

Several years ago, Robert Schuller published his book, *The Be (Happy) Attitudes* (1985), which tackled the question, “Where does happiness come from?” Seizing the verbal trick found in the word “beatitude,” the writer extracted the idea of “attitude.” Mary Fairchild commented in *Christianity Today* (January 7, 2009) about the need for a “be-attitude adjustment.” These writers join a host of others in emphasizing that Jesus wanted to re-orient people’s hearts and minds as they prepared for the coming of God’s new kingdom that he himself was bringing. One main thread of the Sermon on the Mount teaching has to do with re-imagine the Hebrew Scriptures in light of Jesus’ coming. Lost in the shuffle of trying to be an observant Jew in the first century was the idea of human transformation — that we might become new people, new creations. Part of this transformation was a fresh perspective on the poverty, sorrow, disenfranchisement, and hunger. Jesus encouraged a different approach to such serious issues in light of widespread economic and spiritual deprivation in a society where 90% were peasant farmers or artisans.

As we examine the *Beatitudes*, these concerns will enter into the discussion. But so will our own situation at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when old economies no longer meet human expectations and when the human condition continues to suffer from self-serving actions at a time when genuine cooperation should be increasing. What does the church of Jesus Christ bring to the table in light of these contemporary concerns? Our hope is that taking a new look at this old text will open doors to a better way of being human. Adjusting *attitudes* also must be followed by adjusted *actions*, lived according to the standard set by Jesus himself. The true road to well-being follows *the other way* shown to us by the One who is “the Way.” To be blessed is a gift from God that arrives as we cultivate our relationship with Jesus Christ, His Son. Sharing the words of the worshipping community: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow...”

### **As We Get Started: Preliminaries and Promises**

This series’ chosen text belongs to the larger *Sermon on the Mount* found in Matthew 5-7. We begin with a brief overview of the two main sections.

### **Outlining the Text: Matthew 5:1-16**

5:1-12 comprises what we commonly call “The Beatitudes”, pithy sayings which explain what the “blessed life” looks like, and how we can achieve it. To Jesus’ audience, to be “blessed” meant to live in the favor of Yahweh. Israel had a problem with that. Jewish people feared that they did not live in God’s favor, but were, in fact, still

in exile and under judgment for past sins. "How can we fix this problem?" was a common question. The religious leaders had a variety of answers, but Jesus deeply believed that most of them "missed the mark" entirely. What Jesus offered included: being poor in spirit, mourning, being meek, and the like. At the center of this "list" of spiritual activities was this one: "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (5:6) and it was followed by such qualities as mercy, purity, and peacemaking. Moreover, righteousness was something you could be persecuted for (5:10). All in all, Jesus pointed out that "the kingdom of heaven" would be the special portion and reward for living this way (5:3, 10, 12). Such "blessedness" was not a solemn and boring affair but invited people to "Rejoice and be glad" since reward is found "in heaven", that is, "in God Himself."

5:13-16 makes this more personal by introducing two metaphors with the words "You are..." The righteousness Jesus invites people to practice has to do with "who they are" and not simply with a series of things "that they do". "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world". *Salt* preserves and heals in its ordinary usage, as well as giving to food a pleasant taste. Be like that, Jesus encourages them, in their "hunger and thirst for righteousness." And, *light* is helpful for "everyone in the house," Jesus reminds them, making otherwise dimly seen objects suddenly visible. Only, in this case, it was not *objects* but *God* who becomes visible when people see Him and live like Him in the midst of the darkness around them. "Good deeds", as defined by Jesus, are not things we do to call attention to ourselves, but are for God, by making Him the center of our efforts so that we might bring *Him* "praise" and not *ourselves*.

### About the Sermon

When Jesus announced the coming of the kingdom of God, he supported that claim with fresh new interpretations of Israel's Torah. From the beginning of Yahweh's relationship with His people, He communicated His words through a covenant document. Jesus did the same, renewing the covenant through the words found in what we call the *Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5-7). Through this speech, Jesus gave old truth new meaning for a new generation of Israelites. Central to his reinterpretation of Torah was the understanding of "power" and how it was to be used by God's restored community. Such teaching didn't come too soon in light of the "power structures" found in Rome and Jerusalem. This new teaching would overturn the old order of thinking about power. None of the political or religious solutions offered by the various groups within Judaism were adequate to implement the kingdom program Jesus offered to his people.

When Luke gives us his version of Jesus' teachings, the setting is not "on the mount" but "on the plain" (see Luke 6:17-23). Neither variation can lay claim to an exclusive interpretation. Matthew imagines the *Sermon* coming down from *on high*, much like Moses on Mount Sinai receiving and giving the Ten Commandments. Luke situates these words *in the lowly place* and among those "down to earth," who most need its message. We can sacrifice neither perspective and must affirm them both. Here is teaching from *heaven* that reaches down to *earth*. A sermon on the *mount* that is needed on the *plain*.

### Matthew the Teacher

When Matthew constructed his Gospel, he followed a familiar five-part pattern, imitating the five books of Torah. Since the *Sermon* introduces Jesus' teaching to the audience, it belongs to the first of these five sections. Briefly, we offer a birds-eye-view of *Matthew*, highlighting the main teaching sections and showing how the *Sermon* fits into the scheme:

- **Introduction:** Infancy Narrative: Chapters 1–2
  - Narrative: 3–4
    - First Discourse: "**Sermon on the Mount**": 5–7
  - Narrative: 8–9
    - Second Discourse: "**Missionary Instructions**": 10
  - Narrative: 11–12
    - Third Discourse: "**Collection of Parables**": 13
  - Narrative: 14–17
    - Fourth Discourse: "**Community Instructions**": 18

- Narrative: 19–22
  - Fifth Discourse: "**Sermon on Future Things**": 23–25
- **Conclusion:** Passion & Resurrection Narrative: 26–28

Each block of discourse ends with: “When Jesus finished these words ...” (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).

Interspersed with the discourse material are narratives that tell about Jesus’ miracles and about the circumstances that occasioned the specific teaching. When Matthew assembles this material, he applies his own style as *teacher*, suggesting that the Gospel originally functioned like a catechism for orienting new believers to the life of the church. One feature of this *curriculum* is the frequent inclusion of quotations from the Old Testament — the Hebrew Bible already familiar to Matthew’s audience. When introducing these texts, the writer uses the formula, “to fulfill,” followed by the citation. For example:

<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us" (Matthew 1:22-23) [From Isaiah 7:14].

Or,

<sup>14</sup> ... to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: <sup>15</sup> "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles-- <sup>16</sup> the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (Matthew 4:14-16) [From Isaiah 9:1-2].

Scholars believe that Matthew’s audience probably were acquainted with the Hebrew Bible or had been recently instructed in it, and so the main task of the Gospel is to offer a *new orientation* for reading the text in light of Jesus’ coming and mission. Jesus himself takes up this agenda early in the *Sermon*:

<sup>17</sup> "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" (Matthew 5:17).

Jesus discloses a deep reverence for the biblical text, but he disagrees with the rigid and wooden ways that Second Temple Judaism chose to interpret it. To Jesus, the text bore witness to the Word that “came from the mouth of God” (see Matthew 4:4 from Deuteronomy 8:3). Yet, such a Word from God cannot remain locked between the rolls of a scroll, or pages of a book. Jesus came to unroll the living Word from the written words. He came to “fill full”<sup>1</sup> the meaning of the faithful witness found in the Scriptures. Matthew crafts his Gospel to show how this is the case. He shows veteran Jews how to read the Bible through new eyes; he shows the newly converted how to approach an unfamiliar text through the lens of Jesus own words.

### **So What’s the *Blessed* Truth About Being *Blessed*?**

At the heart of the sayings at the beginning of the *Sermon* in Matthew 5:1-16 is the notion that *the blessings of God are greater than status above others*. These verses are called the "beatitudes" for a reason! Derived from the Latin, *beatitudo* and *beatus*, the idea forms the root meaning of our English word "happy." Further, the notion of *beare*, "to bless," points to an even more settled condition, in the future, of those who have been exalted by God in the afterlife. Medieval writers, such as Augustine and Aquinas, spoke of the "beatific vision of God," referring to heaven and the final state of those who are "blessed" by God. Matthew wrote in Greek, and his Gospel uses the Greek word *makarios*, which has an interesting history in the language.

Lutheran scholar Stoffregen notes that in ancient Greek times, *makarios* referred to the gods. "The blessed ones" were the gods. They had achieved a state of happiness and contentment in life that was beyond all cares, labors, and even death. The blessed ones were beings who lived in some other world away from the cares and problems and worries of ordinary people. To be blessed, you had to be a god. *Makarios* took on a second meaning. It referred to the "dead." The blessed ones were humans, who, through death, had reached the other

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<sup>1</sup> As I have taught in small groups over the years, the word “fulfill” when applied to biblical texts has to do with “filling full” the *meaning*, progressively, as God’s revelation of Himself increases through time. Jesus, who came in the “fullness of time,” is the true fulfillment of the ancient words by being the “Word become flesh and living among us” (John 1:14). Matthew’s Gospel affirms this conviction as it presents the teaching of Jesus.

world of the gods. They were now beyond the cares and problems and worries of earthly life. To be blessed, you had to be dead. Finally, in Greek usage, *makarios* came to refer to the elite, the upper crust of society, and the wealthy people. It referred to people whose riches and power put them above the normal cares and problems and worries of the lesser folk — the peons, who constantly struggle and worry and labor in life. To be blessed, you had to be very rich and powerful.<sup>2</sup>

This reminds us of an old Jewish account: The old Rabbi said, "In olden days there were men who saw the face of God." "Why don't they any more?" a young student asked. "Because, nowadays no one stoops so low," he replied. Who wants to be a lowly person? Who wants to be stooped down? Most of us spend a good part of our lives trying to pull ourselves up. We want to walk tall in society. But, according to this rabbi, it is the lowly — those stooped low — who see the face of God. According to Jesus in the Beatitudes, it is the lowly — those stooped low — who are blessed by God. This is what blessed, *makarios*, means.

When this word, *makarios* was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it took on another meaning. It referred to the results of right living or *righteousness*. If you lived right, you were blessed. Being blessed meant you received earthly, material things: a good wife, many children, abundant crops, riches, honor, wisdom, beauty, and good health. A blessed person had more things and better things than an ordinary person. To be blessed, you had to have big and beautiful things. In all of these meanings, the "blessed" ones lived on a higher plane than the rest. They were gods. They were humans who had gone to the world of the gods. They were the wealthy, upper crust. They were those with many possessions. The blessed were those who lived above the normal cares, problems, and worries of normal people.

Matthew, in his account of *Sermon* uses this word in a totally different way. It is not the elite who are blessed. It is not the rich and powerful who are blessed. It is not the high and mighty who are blessed. It is not the people living in huge mansions or expensive penthouses who are blessed. Rather, Jesus pronounces God's blessings on the lowly: the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the meek, and the mourning. Throughout the history of this word, it had always been the other people who were considered blessed: the rich, the filled up, the powerful. Jesus turns it all upside-down. The elite in God's kingdom, the blessed ones in God's kingdom, are those who are at the bottom of the heap of humanity.

In his commentary on Matthew's Gospel, M. Eugene Boring makes these additional observations about the importance of this word:

Neither Jesus nor Matthew invented the beatitude form, which occurs in the Old Testament and in both Jewish and pagan literature. Jesus and early Christianity, including Matthew, reflect the use of beatitudes in the Jewish tradition, where they are found primarily in two settings: wisdom and prophecy. The setting gives the form a distinctive function and meaning: In the wisdom tradition, *makarisms* declare the blessing of those in fortunate circumstances, based on observation and experience (e.g., Sir 25:7-9), and declare their present reward and happiness. In the Prophets *makarisms* declare the present/future blessedness of those who are presently in dire circumstances, but who will be vindicated at the eschatological coming of God's kingdom (Isa 30:18; 32:20; Dan 12:12). In the New Testament outside the Synoptics, most beatitudes are found in the prophetic book of Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14).<sup>3</sup>

Put concisely, "being blessed" is the result of God's actions, His declarations, and His new arrival in the kingdom that Jesus is announcing. When the disciples of Jesus genuinely follow his commands, and live the life he calls them to imitate, they find themselves under the favor of God's blessing. By seizing a word already rich with meaning, Matthew's account of *Sermon* turns upside-down every preconception about what it means to be "blessed." The kingdom which finally, at last, has broken into human history, brings with it the blessings that people thought would only come "at the end of days." No, Jesus seems to be saying, you don't need to wait

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/allsaintb.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew*, New Interpreter's Bible, Ed. Leaner E. Keck, Vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 177.

for death to experience the state of blessedness. And this new way of being blessed does not entail being better than other people. Instead "the blessed" are the poor, the merciful, the meek, the persecuted, the hungry, the mournful, and the peacemakers. All of which looks quite different, quite upside-down, from the way the power-brokers of the Empire or Second Temple Judaism would have seen it.

The followers of Jesus don't need to deal into the power game. In fact, Jesus says, they should not grandstand their positions or try to remedy their deficits using the ordinary means of power. For example, when a person confronts another human being who is in desperate need, rather than gloating over one's own good fortune, and say, "I'm grateful that I'm not like that person," he should exclaim, "But for the blessing of God, I might well be in that predicament," and then take the next step, and *be merciful*. No follower of Jesus should walk over the fallen lives of the unfortunate. No follower of Jesus should see the failure of another as a sign of divine disfavor. No follower of Jesus should take solace in the loss of another while consoling favor in themselves. We need to remind ourselves from time to time that *the Beatitudes represent signs of those who are truly Christ's disciples*. They help identify those *upon whom God's blessings rest* to aid them in living joyfully. From another angle, they describe the nature of true happiness.

How much different they are from what the secular mind, driven by appearance, does to achieve happiness! The secular mind desires to possess *things, power and social standing* because it thinks happiness resides in them. God reveals that the ultimate sense of human well-being comes from possessing and cultivating spiritual qualities that derive from a relationship with Him. These are the elusive characteristics that sinful mankind is looking for and cannot find.

### **Interpreting the Text of Matthew 5:1-12**

This writer likes labeling this text — "The Blessed Ones" — because the emphasis falls on the gracious bestowal of God on human beings, not on impossible demands or on merited favor. We are a blessed people, Jesus tells his often despairing audience, because God has chosen to bring down His heavenly rule to earth on those who desperately need it. Thus, for example, we are not blessed *because we are poor*, but we are blessed *because God decided to stand with the poor in their need*. From 5:1-2 we discover an audience larger than the twelve disciples, for Jesus "saw the *crowds*" and this prompted him to go "up on the mountainside" where his disciples surrounded him, but where he taught the wider group. Mountains formed excellent amphitheater acoustics, as Moses discovered more than a millennium before (see Deuteronomy 11:29 where Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal served this function). Jesus wanted his wider audience to hear him as he pronounced God's blessings on them.

A few comments are in order about the structure of the "blessed" sayings and its significance. Scholars have long noted that 5:11-12 is unlike the other "blessed" expressions in its use of the second-person address ("you") and its duplication of a previously stated idea: "persecuted." This implies the role of 5:11-12 as an expansion and explanation of 5:10, not a separate beatitude. Jesus may well be commenting on the last "blessed" for the benefit of his disciples to whom he may have, at this point, turned. We proceed on that basis, and affirm that there are *eight* distinct "blessed" sayings, each one forming a literary *stanza* in the text. Further, these eight appear to aggregate into two main divisions, with a few poetic features in the composition.

1. The two groups are, 5:3-6 and 5:7-10.
2. Each of these groups has 36 words in the Greek text.
3. The sentence subjects of each "blessed" in the first section begin with the Greek letter *pi* (Π), our letter "P." Thus we have *ptochoi* ("poor"); *penthountes* ("mourn"); *praeis* ("meek"); *peinontes* ("hunger"). Using this literary strategy creates a common bond among those who share these four human situations, the sources of sadness, disgust, and often anger.
4. No such parallel exists in the second section where each subject has a different letter. This may suggest a shift in emphasis, for the words "merciful," "pure in heart," "peacemakers," and "persecuted" take the text in a different direction, putting the emphasis on the common *commitment* to act a certain way and not on a common *condition* shared by all.

5. With this arrangement in mind, it appears that 5:3-6 does not list *virtues* that we are to imitate, but blessed *promises* from God that persons in deep distress may count on.
6. By contrast, 5:7-10 has to do with God's blessing on those who take up the challenge to live the virtuous life in the face of life's difficulties. The actions of 5:7-10 are performed for the *benefit* of those described in 5:3-6. Might Jesus be saying to the twelve, gathered around him, "Look at all of these who are poor, who mourn, who are meek, and who are hungry. They are your mission field, who stand in need of your mercy, etc."

Martha E. Stortz nicely summarizes this concise outline: "The first four beatitudes target people in situations of suffering ... The second four beatitudes target people who help those who suffer..."<sup>4</sup> Diagrammatically we then have:

<b>Blessings in the Human Condition: Promise</b>	<b>Blessings for the Human Condition: Fulfillment</b>
<b>Poor in spirit</b>	<b>Merciful</b>
<b>Mourn</b>	<b>Pure in Heart</b>
<b>Meek</b>	<b>Peacemakers</b>
<b>Hungry</b>	<b>Persecuted</b>
<i>The people we meet share in this common human condition that consists of situations like these. We may find ourselves also facing such circumstances as suggested by these words. God promises to bless such needy persons through His mercy and grace.</i>	<i>Jesus calls on his followers to extend to persons in need, mercy, purity of heart, and shalom (peace), even if it means paying a high price (persecution). Through such actions, the givers of blessing will themselves be blessed, becoming salt and light for the human condition (See 5:13-16).</i>

### **The Impact of the Beatitudes**

Years ago theologian Fairweather made these comments about the *impressiveness* of the Beatitudes:

They have the boldness of novelty, the weight of wisdom, and the purity of heaven. We cannot conceive of Christ's audience as not listening, or as listening unmoved; for here we have in combination all the qualities that can appeal with power to the human soul.<sup>5</sup>

To readers familiar with the Hebrew Bible, the phrases, ideas, and themes found in this first main teaching of Jesus echo words near and dear to the ancient writers.<sup>6</sup> The beatitude was not new, for it is found often in the Old Testament. Yet Jesus made the beatitude his own, and constantly used it as a mode of expression which carried the idea of love rather than of exaction, the idea of persuasion rather than of force. The ideas and phrases of the *Beatitudes* were largely taken by Jesus from the Old Testament and from current Jewish terminology, to give them in his own teaching a higher import and a greater power. The phrases "the poor," "the mourners," "the meek," "the hungering and thirsting," "the merciful," "the pure in heart," "the peacemakers," "the persecuted," are stock conceptions and language of the Old Testament, and of the Judaism of Jesus' day. The same is true of "the kingdom of heaven," "the comfort of the afflicted," "the entering into possession of the earth," "the satisfaction of longing for righteousness and truth," "the seeing God," and "the becoming sons of God." By adopting such familiar terminology, Jesus connected with his hearers. This was not a mere matter of expediency; for he found an essential unity between his own ideas and those of the Hebrew prophets. These phrases in their highest meaning were rooted in fundamental needs, realities, and aspirations, which Jesus came to satisfy, to proclaim, and to fulfill.

Nor did Jesus speak them in a vacuum. As with much of the *Sermon on the Mount*, the *Beatitudes* address the false righteousness being taught by the Pharisees. Jesus succinctly tells his audience:

For 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 (Matthew 5:20).

<sup>4</sup> *Blessed to Follow: The Beatitudes as a Compass for Discipleship*. By Martha E. Stortz. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008, 12.

<sup>5</sup> "The Beatitudes," *The Biblical World*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Feb., 1905), pp. 134-140.

<sup>6</sup> See the Editorial piece from *The Biblical World*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Aug., 1903), pp. 83-87.

In most cases, the Pharisees simply missed the point of Torah and ignored the message of the prophets. Intent on building society in regimented ways that conveniently left out the undesirables, Second Temple Judaism invented a form of righteousness focused on Jewish distinctiveness but ignored Jewish despair.

As one writer has observed:

In seeking to interpret the *Beatitudes*, we need to read them against the background of the time. The Pharisees and Sadducees as the members of the Sanhedrin, and as the interpreters of the Jewish law, had created a hegemony in which the social order was regulated by their principles of purity and holiness. Every area of life was subjected to these symbolic lines and everyone in society knew where he or she stood in relation to the demands of this ideology of the cult. On the human plane the apex of the triangle was the high priest and the bottom was the levels of what Victorian Europe termed "the great unwashed," and the Jews called the people of the land (*am ha-aretz*) - the common people, uneducated, stained by back-breaking toil, they were day-laborers of the cities or country. For the Sadducees or Pharisees, the same pattern would be repeated in heaven. They believed that the first in the kingdom of God would be the educated, the priests and teachers of the law (all males and middle to upper-class). The last in the kingdom would consequently be the poor and often oppressed "people of the land," along with women and gentiles.

In direct response to such teaching, Jesus proclaims the revolutionary nature of the Reign of God, which turns human standards upside-down. This is abundantly clear from the parallel passage in Luke 3, in which four blessings are pronounced on the poor, those who weep, those who hunger and those who are ostracized. Four woes follow on the rich, those who are fed, who are joyful and of whom people speak well. Matthew retains much of the same radical teaching, although he has extended both the number and the nature of the blessings. He addresses the question, "To whom does the kingdom of God belong?"<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, Jesus recommends a way of life that accents *identity* by bringing people under the distinct blessing of God in ways that echo familiar Old Testament texts, such as Psalm 1:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. <sup>2</sup> But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. <sup>3</sup> He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. <sup>4</sup> Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. <sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. <sup>6</sup> For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish (Psalm 1:1-6).

Such a passage puts emphasis on "delight" and "yielding fruit" and the promise of living with the God who "watches over the way of the righteous." Each experience of God connects with constant "meditating" on the Torah — "day and night." Life with God is seen as the fruit of right relationship, and blessedness as the evidence of that relationship.

One way to see how the term "blessed" was used prior to the time of Jesus, is to survey cases in the book of *Psalms* which shows a preference for this idea.

1:1-2 Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. <sup>2</sup> But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.

2:12 <sup>2</sup> Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (see also 34:8)

32:1-2 Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. <sup>2</sup> Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.

33:12 <sup>12</sup> Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people he chose for his inheritance.

37:26 <sup>26</sup> They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed.

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<sup>7</sup> William Domeris, "Blessed are you... (Matthew 5:1-12)" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no 73 D 1990, p 67-76.

40:4 <sup>4</sup> Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust, who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods. (see also 84:12).

41:1 Blessed is he who has regard for the weak; the LORD delivers him in times of trouble.

65:4 <sup>4</sup> Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts! We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple.

84:4-5 <sup>4</sup> Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. Selah <sup>5</sup> Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.

89:15 <sup>15</sup> Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, O LORD.

94:12-13 <sup>12</sup> Blessed is the man you discipline, O LORD, the man you teach from your law; <sup>13</sup> you grant him relief from days of trouble, till a pit is dug for the wicked.

106:3 <sup>3</sup> Blessed are they who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right.

112:1 Praise the LORD. Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in his commands.

118:26 <sup>26</sup> Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the house of the LORD we bless you.

119:1-2 Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD. <sup>2</sup> Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart.

127:5 <sup>5</sup> Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them (children). They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate.

128:1, 4 Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in his ways.

144:15 <sup>15</sup> Blessed are the people of whom this is true; blessed are the people whose God is the LORD.

146:5-6 <sup>5</sup> Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, <sup>6</sup> the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them-- the LORD, who remains faithful forever.

A recent article in *Christianity Today* bore the title, “Blessed are the jobless: for millions of discouraged workers, the church can turn job loss into a gift.”<sup>8</sup> Notice how the idea of “blessed” get used in this context: as a God-given opportunity for the church to rise and meet the need of the unemployed. Persons are, in the case, blessed, not because joblessness is good, but because something good awaits the jobless when the people of God reach out in mercy and love. Similar language anchors Lawrence Peers’ article, “From stressed to blessed: a conversation for recomposing volunteer service in the congregation,”<sup>9</sup> which deals with fresh ways to energize volunteerism and to transition churches toward revitalized volunteer service practices. Even a Christian view of ecology takes up this vocabulary in “Blessed are the green of heart.”<sup>10</sup> I was especially impacted by the moving account by Ceclia R. McFarlane as she watches a 55 year old woman pass through suffering to death while in the company of those who cared about her and prayed for her in her last hours. “Blessed Watchfulness,” McFarlane titled her essay.<sup>11</sup> Near the end she commented, “I marginally stood on the edge of their grief—wanting her to live yet hoping she would die. As quickly as it came, this odd sense of being one with them vanished. I was a chaplain again—an emoting observer. I realized that the crying had stopped when the praying began.” Blessed watchfulness.

Paul, bidding farewell to the Ephesian Christians, once quoted Jesus:

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<sup>8</sup> Elissa Cooper, *Christianity Today*, 56 no 1 Ja 2012, p 32-34.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Palmieri Peers, in *Congregations*, 36 no 4 Fall 2009, p 22-26.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Jacobs, *First Things*, no 193 My 2009, p 19-22.

<sup>11</sup> *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 56 no 2 Sum 2002, p 181-182.

In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

From the *Beatitudes* we hope to learn the meaning of "blessed" when used in this way. Certainly Jesus teaches us two ways the blessed life works: 1) when a person in deep need *finds* help; 2) when a person who sees a person in deep need *gives* help. There is, then, a twin truth about the sort of life Jesus offers. God is on the look out for hurting people so that He might come to their aid. God wants us to be on the look out for hurting people so that we might come to their aid. In this complementary way, the first four of the Beatitudes faces the second four in Matthew 5:3-12. There are the *needy* blessed, and then there are the *need-meeting* blessed. There are those who receive, and there are those who give. There are those who need our blessing, and then we are blessed when we bless others. In this we hear echoes of the ancient promise to Abraham:

<sup>2</sup> "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2-3).

### **Who Are We, Then, the Blessed? (Matthew 5:13-16)**

<sup>13</sup> "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. <sup>14</sup> "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

The immediate sequel to the beatitudes takes the form of two "you are" statements in 5:13-16. This is poetry and not prose; metaphor and not analysis. Jesus sets before his audience the images of salt and light. He tells his audience, "*Imagine yourselves as salt and light.*" He doesn't say, "Analyze yourselves," as if blessedness and discipleship were part of a formula, stated in ten easy ways. No, he says, "You are salt and light." Such language invites the blessed readers of this text to receive these images and allow them to wash around awhile inside their hearts, imagining the ways salt and light express their relationship to God, themselves, each other, and the world.

Salt and light are *concrete* images, grounded in the resources of God's good creation, and made available for His people to share in equally concrete ways with those in need. Yet, they are more than literary images. Instead, salt and light function as symbols, embodying in themselves the realities they represent. Jesus knows his audience well when he uses these words. He knows that salt and light belong to the most primitive elements of human life — the kind of life lived by those closely connected to earth and cosmos: peasant-farmers, trades people, fishermen, and those who depend on them. God's coming kingdom is coming for their sake, and each of them is called to become the salt and the light of a new world, where righteousness makes earth and world right again. They are called, not to be *like* salt, or to be *like* light, but to become these concrete realities in new and transforming ways.

### ***You Are the Salt of the Earth***

Jesus helps his audience —priming the pump as it were — when he speaks about "saltiness." It is the saltiness that makes the salt "good for anything," Jesus says. At the same time, the loss of saltiness is the great risk we all run in being the disciples of Jesus. Loss of the "good for anything" is always at hand, and with that loss comes a harsh treatment from that hands of "men" who throw us out and trample us under foot. Implicit in the clause "you are the salt of the earth" is the demand, "be good for something!" The salt is for the good "of the earth," this metaphor declares. The blessedness taught in 5:3-12 is not primarily about life in heaven, removed from the realities of the world, but about life on earth which stands in deep need of the special work this blessedness brings. Salt is good for the earth. In what way does this image work in the text?

In the ancient world, before and during the time of Jesus, salt was a commodity, "good" for many things. The Bible and other literature give witness to its uses. Primitive medical applications included its preservative and healing properties that led to its use to dry and harden the skin of newborns (Ezekiel 16:4) and to prevent

umbilical cord infection. For 3500 years salt has been used to preserve meat, and is a symbol for preservation in general and for spiritual incorruptibility in certain forms of sacrificial worship. During sacred meals, salt is a symbol of friendship and hospitality, true today in Arab culture. Jesus alludes to the *friendship covenant* in Mark 9:50: “Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another”—that is, *preserve that flavor that makes you a blessing to one another*.

Paul picks up this imagery in Colossians 4:6: “Let your way of life be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” Speech is highly shaped by our conversation with others, or, as Christians we can shape the speech of others by our conversation. Our answers to the questions of others about our faith are to be guided by the salt principle. In what way will our replies to them preserve our God-given humanity and advance the purposes of God’s kingdom? Further, in the Old Testament, God’s blessing on food and water and on the life of the unborn and on agriculture (Exodus 23:25-26) finds new expression through Elisha in Jericho. According to 2 Kings 2:20-21, the prophet Elisha put salt into contaminated water to purify it. Water is essential to life, and salt, in this story, “healed the water” and therefore preserved life.

Salt also symbolized a less pleasant idea: that of judgment. The earliest sign is the case of Lot’s wife who turned into a “pillar of salt” (Genesis 19:26), and becomes a symbol of what happened to the whole region around Sodom and Gomorrah as a result of God’s judgment (Deuteronomy 29:23). After a battle, the victor might “mark his territory” by putting salt on his enemy’s land, rendering it useless for agriculture (Judges 9:45). Jesus used the language “salted with fire” to describe judgment (Mark 9:47-50). In Ezekiel 47:11 God speaks of barren land and uninhabitable places as “not healed” but given over to “salt.” There is, then, an ambivalence within the image of salt spread on the land: 1) spread for judgment, by making the soil unsuitable for planting; 2) withheld as judgment, by refusing its healing powers for the land.

The kingdom people — those who are blessed — bring both kinds of salt to the earth. They are signs of healing and preservation — for the poor, the mourners, the meek, and the hungry — through their mercy, purity, peacemaking, and acceptance of persecution. Simultaneously, they are symbols of judgment on those who extenuate poverty, provoke sorrow, tread down the meek, and deprive the hungry. Kingdom folk bring healing and flavor and salvation to those in need, and they bring judgment on those who deprive others. In sum, that was the nature of Jesus’ ministry.

### ***You Are the Light of the World***

When Jesus speaks of salt, he speaks of *earth* as the proper place of its application. Earth (Greek: *gē*, “the land”) supplies resources for those who grow food, and this is especially true for peasants who make up 90% of the economy. To these Jesus gives his hopeful message of abundance in the midst of scarcity. But when he speaks of light, he extends the scope to include the world — the *kosmos*. John’s Gospel opens with the “light” of Jesus the Logos (the “Word”) shining in the darkness. Jesus is the “light of the world,” and his followers are also “the light of the world” (John 1:9; 3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46; Matthew 5:14). Cosmos language is creation language, and it draws the reader back to Genesis 1 where light invaded the chaos before creation shaped the world anew. “Let there be light” was God’s creative word where there had been “formlessness, emptiness, and darkness.” By calling his followers “the light of world” he reminded them of their role at the foundation of God’s new creation. Together with the image of salt, light announces renewal, changed, and new beginnings.

Salt and light are words of transformative power for the earth and for the world. Where mercy and purity and peacemaking and courageous suffering invade the old earth and the old world, life springs forth where death had once grown. Jesus gives nuance to his *light* metaphor by recalling the original vocation God gave to Israel: to be a light to the nations, “a city set on a hill.” This phrase referred to the placement of Zion — Jerusalem’s holy name — as high above the other cities of the world, acting as a beacon of light. Through this light, Israel was supposed to give witness to the One True God, Yahweh, and attract the nations to that light:

Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: The law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations (Isaiah 51:4).

Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn (Isaiah 60:3).

The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow (Isaiah 62:2).

As the custodian of Yahweh's Torah — His Word — Israel brought that Word as "a light to the nations." The light of the Word, embodied within Israel's national life, would attract the nations to the "dawn." The nations would "see your righteousness, your glory" and see how God had "called by a new name" those who had once been in exile. In other words, the role of God's people as bearers of His Word would make them "the light of the world." However, as history attests, Israel failed to live up to the role as light-bearer, but, as Jesus implies in 5:15, hid the light under a bushel basket. Jesus plays a clever trick with language here. The bushel basket was used to carry food stuffs, including grain from the fields, measuring out the yield of the crops. In order to cover the light, the basket needed to be empty, void of its fruitful contents. Israel failed to bear fruit for God by covering the source of light. Without the light, neither Israel nor the nations would receive the life of God. Jesus re-commissions his followers as the new light-givers and as the new source of light for the world.

According to Jesus, the world had been in darkness long enough, and Israel had hidden the light long enough. The time had come for the glory of God to once more become visible through the lived-out Word — the Good News announced by Jesus' kingdom message. Jesus wants bushel baskets filled with "good works" so that human beings might see what God is once more doing in the world and give glory to His creative power in human life. "Good works" are the works of the Creator God who brings a new world into being. These are not saving works, for salvation and blessedness come freely and only from the hand of a gracious God. That is the clear message of 5:3-12. These are, rather, the fruits of the new creation, the outworking of sanctification, giving birth to a new community where the poor, the mourners, the meek, and the hungry share in the gracious blessings of God. When the community of faith extends mercy, models purity, makes peace, and endures suffering, light shines brightly, and those in darkness can find their way back to God.

Bonhoeffer, in his *Cost of Discipleship*, aptly refers to Matthew 5:13-16 as "The Visible Community." I've summarized the highlights of his thoughts in a few points below:<sup>12</sup>

- 1) The blessed ones seem only fit for heaven, but Jesus calls them the "salt of the earth". The world needs them to live.
- 2) "The disciple community must be faithful to the mission which the call of Christ has given it" (116).
- 4) They *are* the salt, not *will be* the salt, or *should be* the salt.
- 5) The danger of losing the salt property: judgment always hangs over the community whose mission it is to save the world.
- 6) Light: the disciple community is a "*visible* community". "Flight into the invisible is a denial of the call" (118). How do we hide the light? False sense of modesty. Or, becoming obscure within the world. But the "shame of the cross" is a very visible thing!
- 7) The world must see the good works, not the disciples themselves. What are these good works? The qualities stated in the beatitudes. These bring glory to God.

## Conclusion

Near the end of Isaiah 19, in the middle of an unlikely text, there shines forth a beatitude.

The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance" (Isaiah 19:25).

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<sup>12</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Tr. R.H. Fuller (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 115-119.

I say *unlikely* because placing those three nations under God's blessing, especially at the time Isaiah received his prophecies, seems outrageously incongruous. Imagine a quiz show asking, "What do these three nations have in common: Egypt, Assyria, and Israel?" We'd probably say, "Absolutely nothing!" Yet, even in the early chapters of First *Isaiah* (1-39) where God has much to say about what's wrong with the world, a glimmer of hope pierces the darkness with blessed hope. Calling Egypt "my people" serves up a heap of blessing! Referring to Assyria as "my handiwork" ought to bewilder the ten tribes who vanished from history thanks to the cruelty of that nation. How do we explain the third place finish for Israel? Just look at 19:24 where Israel is called "the third, along with Egypt and Assyria." Yet, in the most enigmatic way, Yahweh, Lord of heaven and earth chooses to surround natural enemies with amazing grace and astonishing mercy.

Bonhoeffer, in his *Cost of Discipleship*, wrote that when Jesus gave the *Beatitudes* there were two distinct audiences present: his disciples and the people.

The *people* see Jesus with his disciples who have gathered around him. ... The *disciples* see the people, from whose midst they themselves have come. ... *Jesus* sees his disciples. They have publicly left the crowd to join him. He has called them, every one, and they have renounced everything at his call. Now they are living in want and privation, the poorest of the poor, the sorest afflicted, and the hungriest of the hungry. They have only him, and with him they have nothing, literally nothing in the world, but everything with and through God. ... Disciples and people, they belong together.

Therefore Jesus calls his disciples blessed. ... He calls them blessed, not because of their privation, or the renunciation they have made, for these are not blessed in themselves. Only the call and the promise, for the sake of which they are ready to suffer poverty and renunciation, can justify the beatitudes.

Jesus calls his disciples blessed in the hearing of the crowd, and the crowd is called upon as a startled witness. ... But the disciples and people are one, for they are all members of the Church which is called of God. Hence the aim of this beatitude is to bring *all* who hear it to decision and salvation. All are called to be what in the reality of God they are already. The disciples are called blessed because they have obeyed the call of Jesus, and the people are as a whole because they are heirs of the promise. But will they now claim their heritage by believing in Jesus Christ and his word? Or will they fall into apostasy by refusing to accept him? That is the question which still remains to be answered.<sup>13</sup>

We cannot call ourselves the *blessed*, rather we hear the voice of Jesus declaring us to be the blessed. We come to God in deep need and we discover in the Gospel the Good News that poor people can become kingdom people and that the mourning people can become the comforted people. Throughout Scripture, human beings live in the precarious place between blessing and curse. This is the way covenant operates in the Old Testament as texts like Deuteronomy 11:26-30 remind us. Yet, Jesus refuses to abandon us in this place. He comes to us with words of hopefulness and joy, words that overflow with true happiness in a world where there is so much despair.

Anxiety is the dominant pathology of our time. Although western culture grasps at happiness through the products of its technology, therapy, military might, and consumerism, we are probably the least happy people in recent times. Persons who possess much have anxiety about losing it. They do not feel blessed. Persons who control much live anxiously that they will lose control. They do not retain blessing. Persons who produce much live anxiously that they will not profit from it. They do not enjoy blessing. For such persons the beatitudes may sound strange and out of touch. How can the poor without a good portfolio be blessed? How can those who mourn without therapeutic treatment be blessed? How can the hungry without viable resources for life be blessed? How can the downtrodden without empowerment be blessed?

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<sup>13</sup> *Cost*, selections from 105-107.

To this age of anxiety the beatitudes preach their hopeful message. They tell of the coming kingdom of God, that originates from another place, and yet looks for a place on earth as in heaven. They call out from the disenfranchised masses a new people who are committed to mercy and to purity and to peace and to suffering for the sake of others. They dare to be salt that heals and that preserves and that purifies. They dare to be light that draws the nations to see the glory of God. They are “the company of the committed,” the community of faith, and the other way to live. They are blessed, not because they feel entitled, but because they are forgiven and filled and sent.

Jesus comes to us, as he came to the crowds gathered around the hilltop when he first spoke these words. Neither the complexity of our age nor the confusion of our anxiety deters him. His words freshen the stale air of our cynicism and the self-sufficiency of our individualism. He calls us to himself where the character and quality of our lives might be transformed. We are blessed, not for our own sakes, but for the sake of others. When we hear his words, “blessed are you...” it brings us to our knees in worship and on our knees in service.

**Digger Deeper:** *Attitude Adjustment*. Blessed: The Word and the Relationship

(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *Attitude Adjustment*. Blessed: The Word and the Relationship, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website at <http://www.c1naz.org>, click on *Resources*, click the tab *Series*, find and click on the series title, find and click on the date you want, and then click on the *Background Notes* link at the lower left. You can also pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Our new series examines the *Beatitudes* of Jesus, part of the *Sermon on the Mount*: Matthew 5:1-16. Prayerfully read these verses, and suggest an outline based on these sections: 1) 5:1-2; 2) 5:3-12; 3) 5:13-16. What is the setting for these words, and how does it compare with the parallel version in Luke 6:20b-23? Discuss the significance of the setting.
2. What is the relationship between 5:3-12 and 5:13-16? How does 5:3:11-12 serve as a transition between the two?
3. What word is repeated throughout 5:3-12? Offer a brief definition of this word as you understand it in this context. Compare these Old Testament usages: Deuteronomy 11:26-28; 28:1-8; Isaiah 30:18; 32:20; Daniel 12:12; Psalm 1:1-12; 2:12; 32:1-2; 33:12; 37:26; 40:4; 41:1; 65:4; 84:4-5; 89:15; 94:12-13; 106:3; 112:1; 118:26; 119:1-2; 127:5; 128:1, 4; 144:15; 146:5-6.
4. Notice the parallel arrangement of the *Beatitudes* into two sub-sections with four beatitudes in each: a) 5:3-6; b) 5:7-12. How do the two arrangements differ, and how do they complement each other?
5. To what extent do you see “attitudes” throughout this text? Are they more prominent in 5:3-6 or 5:7-12? Discuss the idea of “attitude adjustment” as it pertains to this passage.
6. Can you discover the idea of “people in need” in 5:3-6 and “people meeting needs” in 5:7-12? How is meeting the needs of others a *costly* undertaking? Give one clear example of this from 5:11-12. How do we “take a bullet for Jesus”?
7. How do the *Beatitudes* contribute to Jesus’ wider purpose in the *Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5-7)? Take special note of Matthew 5:20.
8. Focus now on 5:13-16. What two metaphors does Jesus use to describe his true followers? Discuss how these relate back to the *Beatitudes* in 5:3-12. What purpose does Jesus envision for his followers when they follow his pattern for the *blessed* life (5:16)?
9. Do some further study: 1) Research the significance of “salt” in the Bible using these texts: Ezekiel 16:4; 47:11; Exodus 23:25-26; 2 Kings 2:20-21; Genesis 19:26; Deuteronomy 29:23; Judges 9:45; Mark 9:47-50; Colossians 4:6. 2) Now do the same for “light” as use examine these passages: Genesis 1:3; John 1:9; 3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46; Isaiah 51:4; 60:3; 62:2
10. How does the Old Testament foreshadow God’s blessings for an ever-widening audience, and what does that tell us about our purpose as a church in blessing other people (Isaiah 19:23-25)? What is highly unusual, from an Israelite perspective, about this passage? What had “Egypt” and “Assyria” previously done to Israel? Who might be “Egypt” and “Assyria” for us today?
11. What present and future blessings does the Bible promise in its last book, Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14)? Can you see any changes in *attitudes* or *actions* which lie behind those blessings?
12. Read Deuteronomy 7:14 in its wider context (7:11-15), and then share your thoughts about the significance of the blessing promised there. What questions does this text raise? How might you relate its teaching to the *Beatitudes*? To what extent is our influence on others and theirs on us a form of mutual blessing in church? How does this blessing operate outside the church?