

Matthew 5:1-12

Exegesis

:1-2 – Setting up the Beatitudes (*Beatitude* came from the Latin word for *blessed* which is *beatus*) (Wiersbe, Mt. 5:1)¹

- "When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying,"
 - The Mountain and the Multitude
 - What was it that caused Jesus to sit on the ορος (mountain) and begin what is now called the beatitudes? From the text, it becomes evident that Jesus literally "saw the crowds" and "went up on the mountain". The original text indicates that the verb "saw" is in fact an aorist participle which means that when Jesus saw the crowds, He took the course of action of ascending the mountain. At first glance this seems to be a simple cause and effect relationship ie. Jesus saw the crowds and reacted by going up the mountain. What is important to understand is why Jesus ascended the mountain. Why did He lead His disciples up the mountain instead of remaining on the plain with the crowds? Jesus' ascension onto the mountain was a common practice for Him. The mountain provided separation for Him from the οχλος (multitude). In Luke 3:13, Jesus ascends the mountain to summon the 12 disciples and in Luke 6:12 among many other instances Jesus ascends the mountain to spend time alone with the Father in prayer.
 - One obvious conclusion that can be drawn from this understanding of the text is that Jesus was directly teaching the disciples. It cannot be known whether the crowds could hear Him or not but the previous chapter in Matthew suggests that the crowds were probably in close proximity. So Jesus was probably directly teaching and interacting with the disciples while the multitude listened in on the conversation.
 - The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament states that the relationship that Jesus has with the multitude is in fact a special one. "οχλος occurs only in the Gospels and Acts. In the Gospels it denotes for the most part the anonymous background to Jesus' ministry. It runs together to see or hear Jesus, Mt. 13:2; Mk. 3:20; 9:25; Lk. 5:1; Jn. 11:42. It receives Jesus, or goes to Him, or seeks Him, Lk. 8:40; Jn. 12:9. It accompanies the Master, Mk. 5:27; Lk. 7:9; Mt. 21:9; Jn. 12:17. Various reasons are found for this by the Synoptists."(Friedrich., p. 586)² So it is apparent that the multitude played a very important role in Jesus' ministry. Sometimes it seems that they represent the sea of people who are lost and without hope (Mk. 6:34) while at other times they are Jesus' family (Mk. 3:31).
 - He Sat Down and Began to Teach
 - The phrase "after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. He opened His mouth and began to teach..." is an important one that should not be left unstudied. The original text loses some of it's meaning in most English translations. A more appropriate interpretation of the aorist participle καθισαντος is "having sat down" which seems to indicate that Jesus' sitting down was a sign to the disciples that they should "approach Him". So since Jesus sat down on the mountain, the disciples were gathering towards Him for some reason. What was that reason? Based on other instances in Scripture when Jesus sat down (Matt. 13:2, Mark 4:1, Luke 5:3, John 6:3) it becomes clear that sitting down was a sign that He was going to teach. Obviously, this is not an exclusive relationship since Jesus probably sat to do many things but in the times when Jesus separates Himself from the multitudes and sits down this was probably a cue to His disciples that He was going to teach.
 - This theory is supported by Friedrich in his work in which he points out the pattern of teaching used by Jesus in Mt. 13:53. He states that while teaching in the temple Jesus stood to read the Scriptures but sat down following the reading to teach the people

(Friedrich, p. 139). He also points out that this would have been a common teaching practice among Jews.

:3-12 The Heart of the Matter

- :3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
 - Blessed – μακαριος
 - The word μακαριος is used here in an adjectival form to describe the person who possesses certain characteristics. There is, though, in the translation of this word into English a disconnect. It seems that so much of the feeling is lost when μακαριος is translated into "blessed" or "happy". This is probably due to the secularization of the word blessed in the post-modern society. It has been shown that over time words evolve with the changing popular philosophies of the day. It can be safely said that when one used the word blessed in the distant past that one was insinuating that one was affected by some higher power in a beneficial way. Recently, however, it seems that the word blessed has been secularized and therefore has lost its powerful meaning and connection with God. So what does μακαριος mean? If a person is described as being "blessed" then that person is experiencing a life changing, spiritual transformation as a result of some trait. At his very core, a person who is blessed is undergoing a spiritual change unlike anything this world has to offer. He is experiencing the power of God in His life and it is transforming his very being. That meaning has been lost in the present day interpretation of the word "blessed" but that seems to be the original intent of the Gospel writer.
 - Poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven
 - This phrase is the first of many that describe the state of the believer in regards to his own spiritual condition and his need for the grace of God. The next few phrases uttered by Christ seem to have a cause and effect relationship. So each of the next few verses will be analyzed in that manner.
 - Cause: Poor in spirit
 - This phrase is quite self explanatory but it can also be easy to miss the entire meaning of it without careful examination. Louw describes πτωχοι as "an idiom, pertaining to one who is humble with regard to his own capacities (in the one NT occurrence, namely, Mt 5.3, this humility is in relationship to God." (Louw, 88.57)³ So it is very important to understand that the believer is truly transformed by God when he realizes that he is entirely without worth. On his own, the believer is destitute. He has nothing to offer God that is of any worth. Once he realizes this, once he humbly accepts his worthless spiritual situation, then he is prepared to be transformed by God. The process of realizing his own spiritual bankruptcy and knowing that Christ has renewed his spirit is a continual one.
 - Effect: theirs is the kingdom of heaven
 - A more literal translation of this phrase is gained through a careful understanding of three words: 1) present active verb εστιν = "they are", 2) genitive noun ουρανων = "heaven's", 3) nominative noun βασιλεια = "kingdom". So a literal translation would be "they are heaven's kingdom" or "they are the kingdom of heaven." Bringing together the cause and effect of this verse, one complete thought is rendered. A believer must continually realize that he is "poor in spirit" or realize that he has nothing whatsoever of value to offer God, that he is essentially spiritually bankrupt. The effect of this realization is that Christ will regenerate that person and that he will be a part of heaven's kingdom.
 - The grammatical structure of this phrase tells the reader one very important thing and that is that the believer, realizing that he is "poor in spirit" will be a part of "heaven's kingdom" in the present time. This means that the words being spoken by Jesus are not reserved for an eschatological future alone but for every believer in the present. Stott comments that there is a belief that this group of verses is

being spoken by Christ to describe the ultimate end of times. The grammatical structure of the words used does not support this however. Knowing this, then it is safe to say that those who constantly turn to Christ out of humbleness because of their spiritual condition are the true members of the kingdom of heaven in the present and one day that kingdom which is of a spiritual realm now will be established in a new way.

- :4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

○ Cause – Mourners – πενθουντες

▪ First, it is important to recall the understanding of "Blessed" as meaning spiritual transformation. So those who mourn will be spiritually transformed. It is important here to understand what exactly is meant by πενθουντες. The word itself is a present, active, participle and so it can be translated as blessed are the mourning. The real question here is what would a Christian mourn about that would cause him or her to be spiritually transformed by God? Louw states: "The reference in Mt 5.4 is not to grieving or mourning for the dead but rather sadness and grief because of wickedness and oppression." (Louw, 25.142) This seems to be an accurate understanding of what a believer would mourn about. After all the fate of the dead are sealed but the wickedness of society and the oppression of believers as a result of that wickedness was and is a real difficulty.

○ Effect – they shall be comforted – παρακληθησονται

▪ Here in this verse, in this word lies the strength of the argument for an eschatological meaning to the Beatitudes. It seems as if Jesus is offering comfort to the mourners in the future since "comforted" is written in the future tense. It also seems to fit with other portions of Scripture which indicate that the times will get worse up until the point when Christ comes back and then everything will be made right again. This theory does not, however, match up with the interpretation of the other key words in this section of verses. Recall again that "blessed" is referring to a spiritual transformation process that takes place in the life of the believer who is active in the stated causes such as poor in spirit and mourning with the effects of being heaven's kingdom and being comforted. So "they will be comforted" is written in the future tense because it lies in the future of every believer who mourns for the evils in society. It is a promise from Christ to every believer who laments over a wicked society. It can quite literally be stated as: "I will spiritually transform your life when you mourn over society by comforting you."

- :5 "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth."

○ Cause – Gentle – πραεις

▪ There are few words in the NT that are more misunderstood by the general reader than this word translated gentle or meek. Especially in the Western culture, gentleness and meekness are often times paralleled with weakness. Therefore, gentleness, meekness, and weakness are considered by many to be synonyms and also carry a negative connotation in Western culture. So it must be understood what Jesus means here by "gentle". Strong states that gentleness is a disposition in which the believer accepts all that God is doing and will do as good and so he does not resist God's will. Strong goes on to say that gentleness is the opposite of self-assertiveness and self-interest. (Strong, 4239)⁴ So the life of the believer will be transformed by Christ when he surrenders himself to the will of God.

○ Effect – Inherit - κληρονομησουσιν

▪ So what will be the effect of the surrendered heart? The effect will be to inherit (κληρονομεω) the earth (γην). It is difficult to understand the concept presented in this verse since to this point everything promised to the believer has been spiritual. At first glance, it appears as if the believer will be given material possessions if he would just surrender himself to the will of God. To interpret Jesus' statement this way would not be consistent with the other cause-effect transformations presented in this text. To truly understand this statement, one must understand the original Hebrew verb **יָרַשׁ** which is used to indicate someone giving another an inheritance. The most obvious Biblical account of this taking place is God giving the Israelites their inheritance of the promised land. During this time, the promised land was the ultimate sign to

other nations that Yahweh was the real and all powerful God of the world. So is Jesus promising believers that they will receive a promised land? While it is evident based on other Scripture passages, primarily in Revelation, that believers will dwell with God on a new earth that is not the sole meaning in Jesus' words here. Jesus is using the word 'earth' here to insinuate that if the believer will surrender his life to God, to have a gentle disposition, then he will inherit from God everything he could ever need. So Jesus is stating that for those who are gentle, who refuse to join society in the scramble for dominance, they will inherit everything.

- :6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

○ Cause – Hunger and Thirst – πεινωντες – διψωντες

▪ The two words used here "hunger" and "thirst" are being used figuratively to indicate a strong desire. (Louw, 25.17) A person who has gone without food or water for an extended period of time would truly understand the figurative meaning of these words (as many of Christ's followers probably would have). There is nothing more basic in one's material life than the desire to eat or drink when food and water are short. Christ is stating that He will transform the life of the person who is desiring to be righteous so much so that his desire for righteousness equals his most basic needs for food and water.

○ Effect – satisfied – χορτασθησονται

▪ The transformation that Christ will provide for the believer who strongly desires righteousness or literally rightness with God will be satisfaction or contentment. Notice that χορτασθησονται is the passive form of the verb. This means that the believer will not be content in his righteousness on his own. So it is not something that he will earn or create on his own. It is something given to him. It is given to him by Christ. Promised to him as a result of his strong desire to be right with God. Vincent states the use of this word best as "A very strong and graphic word, originally applied to the feeding and fattening of animals in a stall. In Apoc. 19:21, it is used of the filling of the birds with the flesh of God's enemies. Also of the multitudes fed with the loaves and fishes (Matt. 14:20; Mark 8:8; Luke 9:17). It is manifestly appropriate here as expressing the *complete satisfaction* of spiritual hunger and thirst. Hence Wycliffe's rendering, *fulfilled*, is strictly true to the original."⁵ (Vincent, 1:3)

- :7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

○ Cause – merciful – ελεημονες

▪ Christ will transform the lives of those who have mercy on others or show compassion to others.⁶ (Swanson, 1798) This obviously rests on the ultimate need that every believer must admit to having which is the need to be forgiven and saved from God's wrath by Jesus Christ. So Christ will transform the merciful person's life by projecting His mercy on him. Jamieson reminds the reader that this is a parallel text to Ps. 18:25 "With the merciful Thou wilt show Thyself merciful."⁷ (Jamieson, Mt. 5:7) It can be stated with confidence that this mercy is a major part of the great commandments of loving God and neighbor which is the cornerstone to the Christian faith.

○ Effect – show mercy – ελεηθησονται

▪ Note that the believer should have mercy which is a trait and thus an adjective describing his behavior while here the effect of having mercy is receiving mercy. Ελεηθησονται is the passive tense of the verb to show mercy. So Christ transforms the life of the believer who is merciful by showing mercy. The believer receives this mercy as a gift from God. He is transformed by God's mercy and thus is able to be even more merciful to his fellow man.

- :8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

○ Cause – Pure of Heart – καθαροι καρδια

▪ First, it is necessary to understand the concept of the heart as it is used in the NT. During NT times, the heart was believed to be the center of one's essence or being. Thus it is understandable why people would accept Christ into their hearts. This really means to accept Christ into the

very essence of their being. The word καθαροι is closely linked with ῥηοῦ which was used to describe the ceremonial cleanness of a person or an offering. So those listening to and reading Christ's words would have understood the phrase "pure of heart" as someone who is entirely acceptable to God, someone who is free of impurities and is thus able to come to God in worship.

- Effect – they shall see God – ὁψονται θεον
 - The transformation that Christ does in the life of the believer as a result of his determination to have a pure heart is that the believer would “see God”. A true understanding of this passage can be found when the meaning of ὁψονται (see) is defined. Is this an eschatological reference to the end times or even upon death when the believer will see God? Or does the word have a figurative meaning? While it is possible that this passage is referring to a point in the future when the believer will actually see God, it is unlikely. It is more likely that Jesus used figurative language to insinuate that the believer would perceive or know God in a way that he didn't earlier in his life. This is supported by the fact that the previous verses in this passage are taken in a figurative context. Each passage is meant to indicate some spiritual condition that will be transformed inside of the believer and not some physical change that will take place in his life. So this verse is rightly understood to also be spiritual in nature. Blessed is the believer who is pure or ῥηοῦ (clean) because he will know God. A perfectly clean God can only be known by a perfectly clean person. This verse promises that the believer who lives to be clean will be transformed spiritually to know God in a new way.

- :9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

- Cause – peacemaker – ειρηνοποιοι
 - Louw states that the peacemaker is the one works for peace, the one who provides a way for others to reconcile their differences. (Louw, 40.5) The other obvious option for the meaning of the peacemaker would be with regard to war. While this verse can obviously be extended to those who seek peace between warring nations it is most probable that it was intended to interpersonal relationships. Christ comes into the lives of believers to bring them peace. Several verses state the importance of living peaceably with others. Paul understood this importance as he instructed the believer to make peace with others before the day was over (Eph. 4:26). So Christ will transform the life of the person who reconciles problematic relationships.
- Effect – Called a son of God – υιοι θεου κληθησονται
 - The effect of being a peacemaker seems to be more practical than spiritual in lieu of the previous verses. The act of making peace causes someone to be labeled a peacemaker. A peacemaker reconciles broken relationships. The effect of this is that the believer will exhibit his relationship with Christ in a positive way and thus it will be known by others that he is a believer or a son of God. This is not to be confused with Jesus who is The Son of God.

- :10 “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

- Cause – persecuted for righteousness – δεδιωγμενοι δικαιοσυνης
 - There are many different definitions for “persecution”. The “persecution” mentioned here can be as simple as meanness or as Louw states as harsh as “a systematic program to oppress and harass people.” (Louw, 39.45). It is probably most likely, however that Jesus was talking about the systematic persecution that many believers underwent and would undergo in the 1st century church. Christ offers a promise in this phrase to the believer who is persecuted for pursuing righteousness. This “righteousness” is defined as what is good in God's eyes or fulfilling God's will. So Christ promises transformation in the life of the believer who is persecuted for fulfilling God's will. Believers in Christ's time as well as shortly after would suffer intense persecution because they would either separate themselves from their national religion in the case of the Jews or they would cease to worship idols in the case of the Gentiles.
- Effect – kingdom of Heaven – βασιλεια των ουρανων
 - What is the transformation that Christ will initiate in the life of the believer who undergoes persecution as a result of his obedience to the will of God? His is (εστιν) the kingdom of Heaven. He has an inheritance in the kingdom of heaven. During the time of Jesus and shortly after the kingdom who a person belonged to was an important thing. Paul took refuge from the ravaging crowds and cynical leaders in Roman controlled Israel by claiming his Roman

citizenship. Christ is reminding the believer that his true citizenship is in the kingdom of Heaven and not anywhere on earth. Louw points out that persecution can often include “being chased from place to place” and the believers would soon understand and take refuge in these words from Christ when they were “tirelessly persecuted” by Saul of Tarsus. Christ will tirelessly prepare the believer’s soul for his entrance into his true kingdom, the kingdom of Heaven.

- :11 “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”
 - Cause – insult, persecute, falsely say evils against you – ονειδισωσιν, διωξωσιν, επιωσιν πονηρον
 - This verse is very much a parallel statement to verse ten. The three types of evils committed against believers are much like the evil mentioned in the previous verse. What is different is the reason why these evils are being committed against believers. The believers will be insulted, persecuted, and slandered because of Jesus.
 - Effect – because of Me – ενεκεν εμου
 - The believer will undergo a transformation by Christ when he is insulted, persecuted, and slandered because of his faith in Christ. Notice that in the previous verse which is much like this verse, the believer will be persecuted for his attempt to live in the will of God, to be righteous. In this verse, the believer will be persecuted for his faith in Jesus Christ specifically. After all, Jesus had come as the prince of peace but faith in Him as savior would divide homes.
- :12 “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”
 - This verse is the final exhortation. The pattern of cause and effect has ended and Christ finishes this passage with words that would forever link the believers hearing Him and reading His words together along with faithful followers of Yahweh in ages past. They would all hold one thing in common. They would all undergo some kind of persecution for God. Whether it was due to their faithfulness to righteousness or their allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior they had reason to χαιρετε και αγαλλιασθε (rejoice and rejoice greatly) in fact. Why do believers have reason to release a double portion of rejoicing? For two reasons: 1) Because their reward in heaven is great. As it has been shown earlier in this passage, the blessings or transformations for a life dedicated to Christ are not of this world. They are spiritual and thus they are not confined by the limits of time and space. 2) Because they will be forever connected to τους προφητης προ υμων (the prophets who were before you). Understanding the importance that the people of Israel placed on their own family lineage, it is apparent why this statement would have encouraged them. They would be grouped forever with the OT fathers who they idolized and learned about from their youth. This helped them understand the importance of their faith in Christ and the blessing of undergoing persecution for Him.

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