

BLESSED

Life in Christ is filled with blessings too numerous to count and yet, “count your blessings” is an oft-repeated encouragement. As we approach “Thanksgiving” we enter the season of blessing counting, so it seemed apropos to examine again the nature of blessing with a special emphasis on Biblical beatitudes.

We are all familiar with the beatitudes that appear in the Sermon on the Mount in the fifth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, but we may be less familiar with the beatitudes sprinkled throughout the Old Testament and the seven beatitudes found in the book of Revelation.

A beatitude is simply the declaration of the condition of blessedness. Stated most succinctly it is one word, “Blessed!” As in Psalm 1:1: “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked.”

Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology (Edited by Walter A. Elwell, Copyright © 1996) notes that “As the first word in the psalms (1:1), blessed is applied generally to all those within God’s redemptive covenant established with Abraham. The believer praying Psalm 1:1 becomes the beatitude’s subject. His blessedness comes within his relationship to God in which he accomplishes the divine will and keeps himself separate from God’s enemies (1:1-2).

The Torah, God’s written revelation, is his constant occupation (v. 2). Unbelievers are destined to destruction (vv. 4-6), but the “blessed” is promised life with God (v. 3).

In Hebrew the word translated as “blessed” is *asre* and in Greek the word is *makarios*. They are used to declare the blessed condition of people, not God. When referring to God’s blessedness the Greek word is *eulogetos*.

The classic New Testament beatitude has three parts: (1) the adjective “blessed;” (2) the identification of the “blessed” person(s) by a descriptive clause or participle; and (3) the condition of their “blessedness.”

So, in Matthew 5:3, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” we identify the “blessed” persons as the “poor in spirit” and we learn that they are “blessed” in that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Too often commentators, preachers and bloggers reduce the

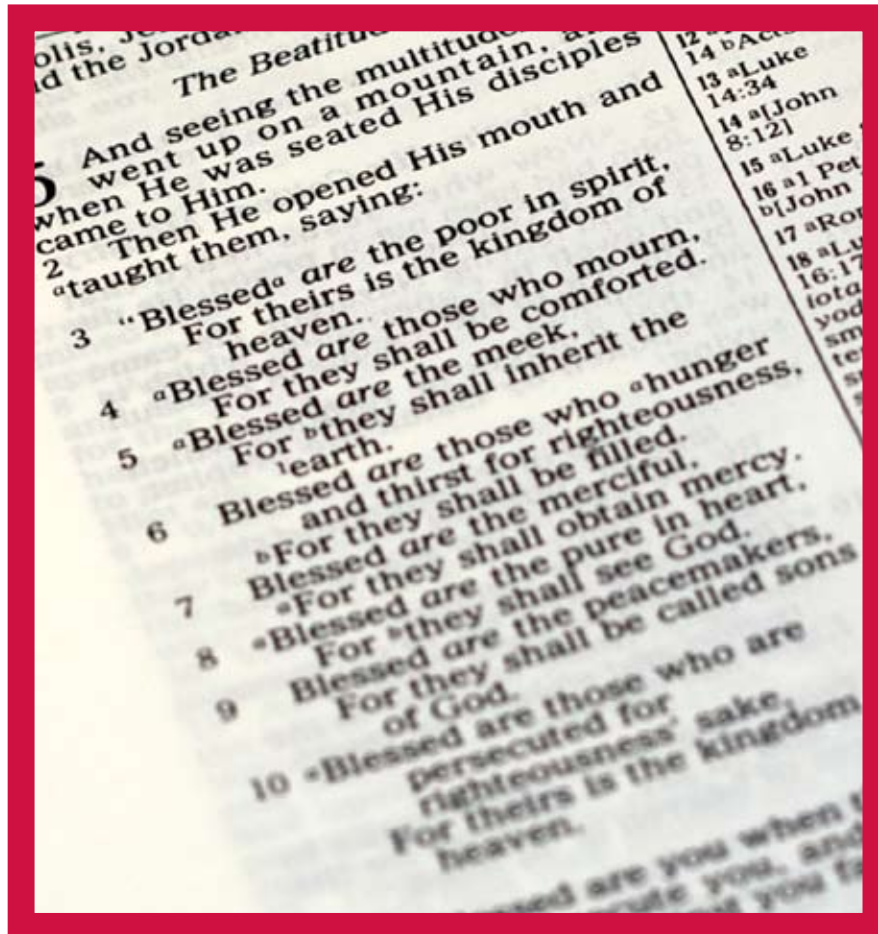
concept of blessedness to happiness or fortune or favor. But blessing takes into account the relationship of the one who is blessed to the God who blesses. Wound up in the Biblical concept of blessing is the reality of relationship – it is deeply personal and dependent upon the confession of sin and reception of forgiveness. It includes emotional well-being or happiness because the one who is blessed knows intimately the secret of being content in all circumstances: a personal relationship with the living God.

The people of God are not blessed because they are favored by God above others nor because they are “fortunate” in terms of worldly privilege. They are blessed precisely because they are God’s – by grace alone, through faith

alone, in Christ alone.

Blessing is a profound evangelical witness to the world and is to be declared by the people of God of themselves, no matter the relative nature of the circumstances of this life.

As we study the beatitudes of the Bible let us cultivate lives that demonstrate our blessedness to others as a testimony to the One from whom all blessings flow.



EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Week I: Old Testament beatitudes

Psalm 1 begins, “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on His law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers.”

The declaration “Blessed!” is spoken over those who “delight in the law of the Lord, and who meditate on His law day and night.” The evidence of the blessing that flows from the status of being blessed is an unwithering life that prospers under the watch-care of the Lord.

Consider the Old Testament beatitudes of the Lord to His people:

- Psalm 2:12 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.
- Psalm 32:2 Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.
- Psalm 40:4 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.
- Psalm 41:1 Blessed is he who has regard for the weak; the LORD delivers him in times of trouble.
- Psalm 65:4 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.
- Psalm 84:4-5 Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. (Selah) Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.
- Psalm 106:3 Blessed are they who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right.
- Psalm 112:1 Praise the LORD. Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in His commands.
- Psalm 128:1 Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in His ways.
- Proverbs 8:32 Now then, my sons, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways.
- Isaiah 32:20 (in context 32:17-20) The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever. My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest. Though hail flattens the forest and the city is leveled completely, how blessed you will be, sowing your seed by every stream, and letting your cattle and donkeys range free.
- Isaiah 56:2 Blessed is the man who does this, the man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.
- Daniel 12:12 Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of the 1,335 days.

For reflection

Consider the conditions of those who are declared “blessed” and then consider whether you meet those conditions in your relationship with God.

EDITOR’S NOTE:

Your feedback is greatly appreciated as future equipping studies are planned.

Share your comments with Carmen Fowler LaBerge via e-mail at cfowler@layman.org, call 1-800-368-0110 or write her at P.O. 2210, Lenoir, NC 28645.

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Week II: Traditional beatitudes from Matthew and Luke's parallels

The beatitudes appear in Matthew 5:3-10 and find their parallel in Luke 6:20b-26 where Luke lists not only blessings but woes. While it may be tempting to imagine that Jesus is singling out separate groups of people, commentators widely agree that the beatitudes are descriptive of all Christians – and the woes likewise applicable to all those who are not in a relationship with the living God through His Son, the Savior, Jesus Christ. The beatitudes are personal declarations of blessedness upon people whose hearts Jesus knows. As the Son of God, Jesus stands in a unique position to pronounce such blessings.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

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

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

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

Ask yourself “who” is blessed and “how” are they blessed. How does this inform your understanding of God’s eternal divine perspective on temporal realities?

The beatitudes are about “internal” attitudes that affect external behaviors; people here on earth who are bound for heaven – Jesus could “see” it in their hearts – by their spirits, by their compassion, by their meekness, by their internal hunger for righteousness, their thirst for the Truth. Jesus could see it in their acts of mercy and the purity of their lives. He could see it in their small acts of kindness to a stranger and he could foresee it the persecution they would surely endure because of Him.

These are intended to be the attitudes by which disciples of Christ live. Not beliefs so much as “be-live-ings.”

Jesus declares much in these few verses: Who will be a part of the Kingdom of Heaven, what the Spirit will do, what believers will inherit, the filling of those who long for higher righteousness, concepts of mercy, purity and peace, the children of God, and the prediction of the passion for Christ as His followers.

And then Jesus turns from making observations about the crowds and He looks His disciples in the eye: “Blessed are *you* when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.” Yikes! This is not the kind of blessing that we’re looking for! Jesus wants to be very clear with His disciples from the very beginning of His ministry that hanging out with Him, following Him, being associated with Him, is costly. It’s not a question of “whether or not” the disciples of Jesus will be insulted, they will. It’s not a question of “whether or not” the disciples of Jesus will be persecuted, they will. It’s not a question of “whether or not” the disciples of Jesus will be misrep-

resented and maligned, they will. Still interested?

Then here comes the “counter-intuitive” command: “*Rejoice and be glad*, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

For reflection

Compare Luke 6:20b-26 with Matthew 5. What more do you learn?

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Week III: Four additional Gospel beatitudes

In Matthew 13:16 Jesus declares the blessed nature of the disciples in “seeing” what is veiled to others.

He teaches the crowds in parables that many find opaque and yet the disciples are able to discern and understand the eternal Truths Christ is seeking to communicate.

Thus Jesus affirms their blessedness, “But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”

The apostle Paul alludes to the blessing experienced by those who are able to discern spiritual things, those who are blessed to possess the mind of Christ, those for whom the truth is not veiled – and he juxtaposes that beatitude with the reality of the spiritual darkness and futility of thinking of those who are perishing.

Read II Corinthians 4:1-18 and consider the distinction between those who are “blessed” because they believe and those who are “blind” because they do not have the faith by which to see.

Taking this approach allows us to cultivate the affect of “woe” in relationship to our neighbors who are blindly walking down wide paths that lead to destruction – and compels us to use the blessing of knowing Christ to invite them to meet Him and find life.

There are two beatitudes in Matthew 16:17 and Luke 1:48 that are spoken to individuals but have application to all believers.

In Matthew 16:17 Jesus declares Peter blessed: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.” The context is Peter’s answer to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter rightly and righteously responded, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Jesus declares that Peter is blessed because of the reality of God’s revelation to Peter – a knowledge unattainable by human effort. If you believe, as Peter believed, then you too share in this beatitude. If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead you stand blessed! Not by your own effort but because God has revealed to you by faith the saving truth that leads to life.

The encounter between two miraculously pregnant women, Elizabeth and Mary, in Luke 1 contains notable blessing language. In verse 45 Elizabeth declares to Mary, “Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”

Mary then responds in song that declares the generation-to-generation blessing that will flow through her. “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.”

Why does Elizabeth say Mary is blessed and why does Mary say that henceforth the generations shall call her blessed? Because of her own merit? Hardly.

The beatitudes that are spoken over and of Mary relate to God’s selection of her as the mother of Jesus. In that she is uniquely

blessed and by her willing surrender to His will, so are we.

Finally, the resurrected Lord Jesus says to Thomas who needed “physical verifiable scientific proof” – “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

For reflection:

What is the gift of God to you in John 20:29? What is the “woe” contained latently in the same verse for those who put their faith in the natural world?

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Week IV: The seven beatitudes in Revelation

You may not have thought of the final book of the Bible as a place to turn for declarations of blessing, but there are seven beatitudes in Revelation. They declare the blessing of ultimate victory, in life and death and eternity, for those who put their faith in Christ.

As you read each beatitude below, consider where you are in relationship to the living God who speaks these words. Consider how you “receive” the Word and how you “hear” it. Consider the times and what lies ahead – on earth and in heaven. Consider what the Lord says about tangible realities like “who” are counted among the blessed, “where” they reside, “what” they do, and their “rights” as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.

- Revelation 1:3 Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.
- Revelation 14:13 Then I heard a voice from heaven say, “Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.”
- Revelation 16:15 “Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.”
- Revelation 19:9 Then the angel said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’ “And he added, “These are the true words of God.”
- Revelation 20:6 Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.
- Revelation 22:7 “Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.”
- Revelation 22:14 “Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.”

What more can we say about these things? If God is for us, we are blessed! So He has said in His Word, so let us live!

For reflection

How can you live out the reality of the blessings God has spoken in His Word over your life? How can you live the blessed reality of a child of God in the world today?

For further study

Presbyterian pastor, Gerrit Dawson, has recently written a book entitled *The Blessing Life* which includes a 40-day Scripture and prayer guide. It will not only help you live as a person who is blessed but as an activated agent of God’s blessing in the world today. Order at www.ivpress.com.