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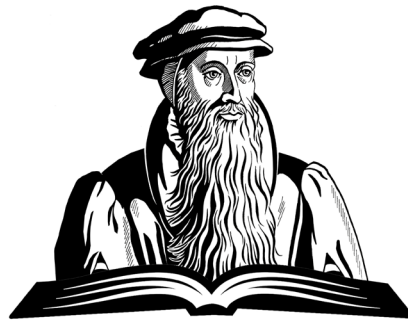
The Beatitudes

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst



Lecture #1

General Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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The Beatitudes

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by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

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The Beatitudes

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Lecture #1

General Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount

Dear friends, it is my privilege to introduce to you the portion of the Scripture called the beatitudes, found in the Sermon on the Mount. We pray that this word may sanctify us and bless us together.

Every realtor is aware of a very important principle in sales, the principle that the context in which the house is found has an impact on the value of the property. That is also a principle that applies to the value of the Scriptures that we discuss, as the context explains much of the portion of the Scripture. Taking a Scripture out of its context and just taking it by itself is like examining a finger by only looking at the finger without the connection. Instead, we would determine the value of a finger by looking at the whole hand and the relationship to the muscles and the nerves and the tendons and the arm and the shoulder and the whole body. Before we take a close look at the beatitudes, which are the nine statements beginning with “blessed are” found in Matthew 5:3-12, we need to first start with a bird’s-eye view of the context, the context of the Gospel of Matthew, and the context of the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5 to 7.

First, the context of Matthew’s gospel: Matthew is writing primarily to Jewish ears. The New Testament Church was at first primarily Jewish. They estimate that shortly after Pentecost, there were around 20,000 Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. These Christians experienced the first level of persecution from fellow Jews, sometimes family members or other Jewish neighbors who accused them of being unfaithful to the Old Testament Scriptures or the teachings of the forefathers. Matthew was called to write to these Jewish Christians to encourage them and to show them that the charge is false. They were not unfaithful to the Old Testament Scriptures. Matthew presents Jesus Christ and His teaching as the Messianic King and His kingdom as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. When you go through Matthew, you find about 65 Old Testament Scriptures quoted. That is more than any author of the other Gospels. Within Matthew’s Gospel, you find him emphasizing Jesus’ words. Matthew records six of Jesus’ Gospel sermons, and you will recognize them as each of them ends with a statement similar to the one you find in the end of Matthew 7:28—“And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings.” That statement marks the end of the sermon. In the sermons that Matthew has recorded of Jesus, there is a common theme - the theme of the kingdom of Heaven or the kingdom of God. That theme was the burden of Jesus’ ministry. Matthew notices in 4:23—“And Jesus went about all Galilee... preaching the Gospel of the kingdom.” The kingdom here is a major theme that is also very closely related to the beatitudes. You see it in Matthew 5:3. The first beatitude is linked to the kingdom of heaven. In the beatitudes, Jesus identifies the genuine citizen or subject of the spiritual kingdom of Jesus Christ. So that much about Matthew’s context.

Now a little closer look at the context of the Sermon on the Mount which is contained in Matthew 5, 6 and 7. The sermon begins with an historical comment, “And seeing the multitudes, Jesus went up into a mountain: and when He was set, His disciples came unto Him: and He opened His mouth, and taught them saying... (5:1–2),” and then comes this masterful sermon, which William Perkins called the key of the whole Bible. For in this sermon, Jesus Christ opens the summary of the old and the new, and He brings them together. In the rest of this lecture, I would like to share with you five general comments about the Sermon on the Mount that I think will be helpful to show you how majestic this portion of Scripture is and how it also relates to the rest of the beatitudes we will look at it together. This sermon is very important for these five reasons.

First, in this sermon, Jesus Christ presents Himself, focuses on Himself, as both the Lord and Savior of the kingdom. The Lord Jesus came to this earth with one mission— to do His Father’s will. His Father’s will was of course varied, but one purpose of His Father’s will was to destroy the kingdom of the devil. As 1 John 3:8 tells us, “For this purpose, the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.” These works of the devil are like a kingdom that operates in hatred and evil and bitterness and violence and selfishness and destruction. That is opposite to the kingdom of Jesus and the restoring of peace and joy. Jesus’ ministry is to build His kingdom and not just nationally.

This is beyond boundaries. This is a kingdom among all the nations of the world. You will notice as you read through this sermon, as well as the rest of Jesus’ ministry, He emphasizes kingdom over 100 times where only twice He speaks about church. That is significant. What does Jesus mean by the kingdom? What does He think of when He speaks about the kingdom of God? He thinks of the way of our life. It begins here in the heart. As it is in the heart, it radiates into our life, into our actions. Our attitude becomes action. Again, Matthew 4:17 reads, “From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” There is repentance of sin to enter this kingdom. For the kingdom, friends, is a way of life, a way of life that begins here and that will continue into the future new earth wherein all the citizens are the subjects of His glorious kingdom, living and dwelling in perfect righteousness. That is indicated in Matthew 5:3, the first beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Now what does the church in this? The church is the pivot, the center. The weekly church gathering is when the Captain of salvation gathers His kingdom soldiers together to teach them. In these gatherings, He encourages them in the battle. He corrects them. He might stir them up to take up the battle again, or He may comfort them as they have experienced defeat. That is the church, weekly gathering, studying and reading the Word and in fellowship with one another. Through that, the Spirit nourishes, strengthens, expands the kingdom. After having heard that word, He expects all His followers to go and to do the kingdom work and to live out the kingdom life wherever we are placed to be His laborers in the kingdom. As we think about the kingdom life, everything and every aspect of our existence is included. It begins with how you think, the renewing of the mind, about God, how you think about yourself, how you think about others, how you think about the world. The kingdom is how you use your time, how you use your mouth, your money, how you manage your relationships with your family, your marriage, with your church family, with your neighbors and even with your enemies. It is so different; you are to love your enemies. How do you handle those who have failed you or those who have offended you or those who want to make use you? All that is part of the kingdom life, and many of these aspects come back in the Sermon on the Mount. Therefore, sometimes the Sermon on the Mount is called the constitution of the kingdom of God.

Jesus teaches us, secondly, that to be part of His kingdom is to have a personal relationship with Him. There is a startling end to the Sermon on the Mount which I want to call your attention to, if you read it yourself, from Matthew 7:21-23. He sketches a people who have an encounter with God, and Jesus teaches here that the Christian life is not just a life of knowing things but

living relationship with Himself. Jesus makes it very clear that no one is a Christian by simply doing Christian things or reciting Christian truth or preaching Christian messages. We only are a true Christian when we are united with Jesus Christ by faith as a fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit and begin to reflect this in how we are from our inside towards our daily interactions with others. To underline in importance back to the beginning of the sermon, Jesus begins the sermon with the beatitudes. Now there is no Scripture, in my opinion, that more clearly defines who is the true Christian than these opening statements of the Sermon on the Mount. As we experience this sovereign and gracious power of God's reign in our life, this teaching will change us to become like the beatitude man or woman.

Thirdly, Jesus is teaching us by this opening section of the beatitudes, as it is amplified in the rest, the absolute necessity of regeneration to be part of His kingdom. "Except a man be born again," He says to Nicodemus in John 3:3, "He cannot see the kingdom of God." While you do not find anywhere in the Sermon on the Mount the word *regeneration*, He defines in the beatitudes the born-again regenerated citizen of His kingdom. Therefore, consider this sermon of Jesus as a major correction of the Old Testament teaching gone wrong. You hear Him say often, "Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time (Matthew 5:21). The Jews of Jesus' time thought that to be genuine safe person meant to be living up to the right standards, and they were rigid, a means to keep a list of all kinds of do's and don'ts, and you earned your way to God by that. In Christ's kingdom, the heart becomes first before the behavior, and the Lord shows that it is not by doing all kinds of things that we earn our way. His kingdom teaching is about Christ and what He has done that earns the way into the presence of God. All the emphasis on the internal and the heart relationship with the Lord and who we are is not new. 1 Samuel 16:7 reads: "The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart." That is still the way that God wants us to consider ourselves, looking at the heart. This portion does that. To Jesus, the Christian life is first being right in the heart which is followed with doing right, and that is the way we live. Both to be right and to do right is really a beautiful and simple definition of the Biblical key word *righteousness*.

Fourthly, Jesus addressed in this sermon an issue that is as much needed today among Christians as it was needed among the Jews of Jesus' days. This is the issue of superficiality or surface religion, the issue that Jesus called "white sepulcher religion", people that look religious and orthodox and traditional and rigid, but really, on the inside, they are full of dead men's bones. What does He mean with that but the attitude of pride, being selfish, insincere, hypocritical, all out there for power, for status, for your own honor, that is dead men's bones. Now that superficiality was heavily promoted in the Jewish culture, when they reduced being godly to measuring up to a whole list of outward standards set by the scribes and Pharisees. While you look to the Scriptures, and there are all kinds of outward standards that God wants us to maintain, He keeps reminding us that the heart is more important in a relationship than all the outward things. Think about your marriage. Your marriage relationship is not defined by the rules you keep, the standards you uphold, the behaviors you display. It is the hearts that are merged in a commitment of love to one another. The health of that relationship and the quality of the heart of that relationship of course are maintained by the standards—and high standards—that will protect the relationship. It is first the heart, then the rules and regulations, as it were, that keeps it protected. That is so also with genuine Christianity. To be a Christian is first and foremost to be in a relationship with Jesus Christ who has raised you from your spiritual death. That phrase *spiritual death* is a term describing our spiritual separation from God, or our spiritual divorce from Him, which is dated back to Genesis 3:6, when our forefathers Adam and Eve rebelled and fell away from God and we with them. If that spiritual relationship is not restored, then Christianity is just an adopted creed we try to live. If it is a relationship restored and a heart renewed, then it becomes an adopted son or a daughter who lives a devoted life to the God Who saved them out of this horrible plight of life. That is what Jesus is after. The error in

Jesus' day remains the problem for us today. What the Jews did, we do today. It is devastating to Christianity when we are holding it simply or defining it by living in certain creeds and living by certain standards or holding certain traditions. No, friends, genuine Christianity, according to the King of the kingdom, is a life that is devoted to God and to our neighbor, while we are trusting upon the King and upon His work as the Savior as the only ground of our acceptance with God. It is Jesus Himself, who in John 13:34—35 really hammers down that emphasis. Listen to His word. It says, "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another." That is already an Old Testament commandment, but the newness of the commandment is that you love one another as I have loved you. That ye also love one another like I did. By this, He says, shall all men know you are My disciples, if you have love one to another.

This aspect of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount makes it timeless and searching, even confrontational with the answer of who is in the Kingdom or who is saved or who is a genuine believer. It is not if you measure up to certain outward standards, if you appear Christian, if you have a certain creed that is good, if you are faithful, or successful or religious. No, it is if you measure up to what the Lord describes the citizen of the kingdom to be like as He writes and describes in the beatitudes. The seven beatitudes are heart issues, are inner attitudes, and all seven are the unmistakable fingerprints of the Holy Ghost. All of this is searching of the superficiality comes to a startling climax in Jesus' words that no doubt were felt like a shock to the original hearers in Matthew 5:20. Imagine all these people standing there. They have all been bred to revere the scribes and the Pharisees. These are the examples of ultra-godliness. These are the spiritual giants of the day. They were church leaders, everyone revered them, and Jesus' words must have been like a hammer blow when He says in verse 20, "For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter the kingdom of Heaven." There is the kingdom of Heaven again. We shall not enter if it does not exceed. This word *exceed* does not mean if you add more layers on top of each other. That is what the scribes and Pharisees did. No, exceed means it has to go deeper, to the heart. Can you see that a steady diet of this teaching of the Sermon on the Mount and the beatitudes and the really intensive law teaching Jesus did in this sermon is confrontational yet profitable? It will not give an increase in the numbers of Christians, but with God's blessing, it will surely enhance the quality of Christianity, and that may also become a tool of evangelism.

The last observation is that Jesus gives us in the beatitudes an unmatched model by which to examine what is genuine Christian experience. There is as great a variety in genuine Christian experiences as there is a variety in the woods, in all the different trees. No one who has come to know Christ and the glory of His teaching and has been converted from a lifestyle of unchristian to Christian is similar to another. Look at the contrast between Matthew, Levi is his name in the Scripture story, and how he was called by the Lord as compared to how a Saul of Tarsus was called, who became Paul, the author of many epistles. Take John the Baptist and his evidence of new life before he was born, to the thief on the cross, the man who was nearly dead before he comes to Christ. Think of Jesus' mother Mary, sweet mother as it were, and then a demon-possessed Mary Magdalene who was also brought into the kingdom. Or I see a serious-minded Nathaniel sitting under the fig tree, and I see the wild Corinthians and Ephesians who come to Christ. Now we tend to emphasize a dramatic conversion as more real. That is not Biblical. The power of God is not only in an eruption of a volcano. The power of God is seen in a little flower or even a blade of grass, both amazing, both powerful. So back to the beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, the uniqueness of God's work is that no matter what way God saved you, no matter the circumstances you went through in order to come to know the grace of God and Jesus Christ, every regenerated soul is able to identify him or herself in the beatitudes. If your heart is not sketched or outlined in these seven, number of completeness, beatitudes, you miss this necessary spiritual character needed to be part of God's kingdom. Therefore, as Jesus opens His Sermon on the Mount, purposely with

this outline of the citizen of the kingdom, again and again emphasizing that the renewed character comes before the task of the Christian. First, who are you, then what are you, the salt and the light. The behavior follows the change of heart. Now after this overview of the Sermon on the Mount, we are ready to take a closer look at the beatitudes. May God bless this teaching and make us all a blessing to others with what we have so far learned already. Thank you.