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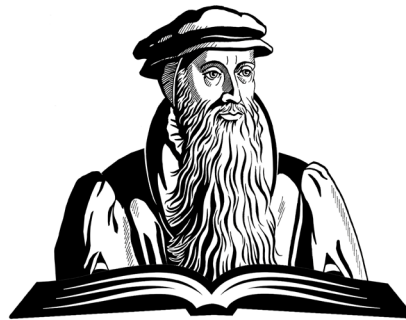
The Beatitudes

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst



Lecture #2

General Introduction to the Beatitudes



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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The Beatitudes

10 Lectures

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

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Lecture #2

General Introduction to the Beatitudes

Dear friends, welcome to the second message related to Matthew 5:2–12, commonly known as Jesus' Beatitudes. May God enable us and bless us as we examine His word there in Matthew together. Now Jesus is the chief of all prophets. I'll call Him the Master Teacher, not only with regard to the content, what He teaches, but also to His methods, or how He teaches. As we go through Jesus' teachings in the Bible, you'll notice that He loves to teach in surprising contrasts, He often puts white against black or good versus evil. We see that also in this astonishing Scripture of the Beatitudes. There are some amazing contrasts that we would usually not combine together. Who of you would call someone blessed (the word *blessed* you find in these Beatitudes and in every opening word—that means supremely happy)—would you call someone blessed who is poor? Or sad? mourning? Or someone who is hungry (and the word is *starving*)? Wouldn't we call *blessed* those who are rich and well fed, or laughing and in a nice condition? So that's a surprising contrast in the Beatitudes.

The second amazing thing about these Beatitudes is not only the contrast, but that Jesus knows how to say something very profound in a very simple way. What Jesus accomplished in the Beatitudes' teaching is really unequalled, for He has united in these seven statements all His people scattered over all ages of the world history, over all the cultures, in one—in one picture. Even though there is enormous diversity among them all, He is able to unite them in these seven statements, identifying His people by the essentials. Jesus has innumerable followers throughout all the ages, and they are incredibly diverse. Just think of how different the ancient Eskimos are, hunting and fishing, compared to the modern Generation Z with all their technology and their wit. I mean, how far apart can they be? Many of His followers can't even properly read or write, but others of His followers are writing books, developing software, are doctors with PhDs and invent rockets. Yet Jesus is able to describe the common denominator of all His kingdom people, among all that diversity, into one set of seven statements that describes them as they are. Even if the world would last for another 6,000 years or 10,000 years, and even if our technology would advance beyond what we today think is possible, the Beatitudes do not need to be updated, or they do not need to be adjusted. We do not need to have any addition to it to describe the character of the citizens of the kingdom of Jesus, and the kingdom people that are on their way to the kingdom of Heaven. That is an amazing accomplishment He had on this mountaintop, as He sits there with all His disciples surrounding Him, teaching them. He also proved Himself, and that's another amazing aspect of Jesus as teacher, He proved Himself well enabled to connect with His hearers where they are.

Most of the Jews sitting around Jesus Christ at this moment on this mountain, as well as His own

closest disciples, are people who were filled with wrong expectations. Their idea of the expected Messiah was wrong. They were somehow looking for a reinvented David figure who would chase away all the nasty Roman soldiers out of the country of Israel. That was their expectation. These people were expecting that, and what they met in Jesus didn't match their expectations. This Rabbi Jesus, who speaks about another kingdom, never called for a rebellion, didn't organize an armed uprising, didn't raise His voice in any way to stir the people to action. No, He came as a prophet, He came to preach. He came to bring a message. Not only did He come as a prophet to preach a message that was unexpected, He also came as a King, but not as an earthly king. He came to deliver His people from something far worse than the Romans were—the enemy of pride, the enemy of hunger to power, the enemy that destroys everything, selfishness, greed, anger, unbelief. These are the things this King came to deliver us from. Thirdly, He also came as a priest and as a sacrifice, to make atonement for sin, and that aspect of Christ was totally foreign to the Jews that are here around Jesus. So not only were their thoughts about the King way off, their ideas of God's kingdom differed greatly to what Jesus was teaching. Jesus says somewhere in Luke, My kingdom doesn't come with outward bells and whistles. It's not in material things, in buildings, in parades of armies and soldiers. My kingdom is an inward change of heart that obviously leads to an outward change seen in a godly lifestyle. So nothing of these material things, nothing of these secretive organizations, nothing of this undermining of the current political leaders, nothing of that in Jesus' kingdom. No, His kingdom is a personal devotion, of loving God above all, and every neighbor no matter how unliked he might be; you love them as you love yourselves. In Jesus' kingdom, the heroes and the stars, they aren't the military strategists. They aren't accomplished businessmen or elites, they're not the handsome looking actors who can entertain everyone. No, they are not those who stand tallest among men. Who then are the kingdom people? These Beatitude people are they who bow the deepest, they who quietly and humbly and joyfully serve their fellow men out of a love to God, that's Jesus' kingdom's teaching.

Now it's clear from how Matthew ends Jesus' sermon and describes the end of the sermon, that Jesus was able to connect with His hearers. Matthew writes, "And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at His doctrine: for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Matthew 7:28–29). Now literally this means they were struck out of themselves for a while—they were awestruck. They were amazed. They were dumbfounded by what Jesus is teaching us in the Sermon on the Mount.

Now before we move into the worm view to examine the details of Matthew 3:12, I once more, in this lecture, want to take the bird's-eye view of the entire Beatitude section. It's always very helpful to have an overview of the general character and the structure of a passage before we take it apart line by line, and sometimes even word for word. Let me begin with making first three general observations about the section we call the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:3, beginning with "Blessed are the poor in spirit", until the last one, verse 12, in which Jesus speaks about *rejoice*.

Now each of these Beatitudes has a strong and purposeful emphasis on our spiritual being—that's why it's the word *Be*-attitude—rather than on our physical doing. This is an important observation to keep in mind. Jesus describes His kingdom people by who they are rather than by what they possess or what they accomplish. Who they *are*. Notice He doesn't call, in any of these statements, attention to their material wealth or their physical strength or their social status or their influential positions in life. He doesn't. He emphasizes the inner disposition of someone poor in spirit, somebody who's mourning, meek. In Christ's teaching, it's about the attitude of *being* rather than the action of *doing*, though of course, there are doings flowing out of these attitudes within. Therefore, friends, when we look at this passage, Jesus here trumpets a message that it is so acultural, it is so unnatural to our thinking, it is so opposite, and there's the contrast to what we might expect. You are not blessed because you possess much, or because you are admired by everyone, or you're in a top position, or successful. None of these are included in this list of

blessedness. Instead, you are blessed if you are a person with this attitude, with this mindset, with this inner drive, with this inner motivation. It's not in Jesus' kingdom about wearing a special distinct uniform with stripes and stars—it's not. In His kingdom, it's about having a special distinct heart within that bears the evidences of the Holy Spirit. Again, as I said in my previous lecture, the kingdom life is not reduced to a list of do's and don'ts that we tick off. Instead, kingdom life is an elevated life of godly character that reflects the glory of the King, like the King—King Jesus.

Secondly, a general observation about these Beatitudes is that all seven Beatitudes form together a flawless portrait of a born-again sinner—there are seven sketches. Seven is the number of perfection, fullness. Jesus' seven statements are just not a random collection in a random order. As you will see, there's a purpose in the order that Jesus placed them in the Beatitudes. The one is connected and interconnected, not only to the one that precedes or follows, but even to those down the line. None of them can be missed, and none of them will be missed in this new creation of a born-again soul. A normal, healthy person will have lungs, and heart, and hands, and feet. So the born-again soul will possess each of these seven characteristics. None of these seven can be missed. Yet, as with natural children, so with spiritual children, none are born mature. A little child makes noise, and sometimes lots of noise, but it doesn't talk. The little child moves but doesn't walk. A little child does trust in mother and father, but they can't verbalize it. It's all part of them. So you have immature children that develop and grow into mature adults. Now, so it is with Christ-born-again people, they possess all the characteristics of the new life, but each of them begins immature. Each begins small, needs to grow, and each will be growing—how long?—all their lifelong, towards the perfection that is finally reached in glorification.

Now the third observation is that all seven Beatitudes together have a very beautiful structure. I like to compare this seven to my rib cage. There is a breastbone in the middle, there are ribs on either side. In Jesus' Beatitudes, there are three ribs on each side, and the middle one, the fourth Beatitude, I liken or compare to the breastbone. That is the heart of the Christian. "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5:6). Some have called that the heartbeat of the genuine Christian. Now a close examination of numbers one, two, and three versus numbers five, six, and seven, on the other side of the breast bone, as it were, show there is a corresponding relationship between them. This is the masterful structure of these Beatitudes. The first three—poor, mourn, meek—are the internal attitudes, the disposition or frame of our heart. Five, six, and seven are, as it were, the external expressions of the attitudes of the heart. They are related.

Let me illustrate this internal relationship between the first three and the last three just a little bit deeper. The first one, poor in spirit—once you know your own poverty, your own weakness (that's number one), you will be much more merciful, much more compassionate, much more understanding to others (number five). So numbers one and five link. Again, if you sense your sin, you're wrong in what you've done, you feel sorrowful about this, what you've done to God, you reflect on that, it hurts what you've done. Now such a one will also be very sincere in heart, and you will take sin seriously as you strive after holiness—that's the sixth one, the pure in heart. So numbers two and six are linked together. Those who have been learning all this about themselves end up to be meek—the quality of meekness, what a beautiful quality of character. Now such will do all to seek reconciliation of others with God, and so they will be the true peace makers. They're willing to give up their rights, if necessary, to be a peacemaker. So we see that three, the meek and the peacemakers are linked together. In the middle of that sits the fourth one, the center, the heart. So to conclude these three general observations, can you see the structure that the Savior built in these Beatitudes. Isn't that beautiful?

This is not just a random list. This is carefully tailored teaching to bring across very strongly the point about who are the citizens of the kingdom. Now the majesty of the Beatitudes is that they tie very many lines of truth together. We could have expected that, of course. Look around in

nature. The Creator has not just randomly put our nature together. Everything is organized to the finest details. There is design. There's correlation. There is interrelationship. Even though now, due to sin, we see much chaos and sickness and weakness and brokenness in our nature around us, there is, on the bottom of it, order. Similarly, we find it here in the words of the Re-creator, God's work of re-creation in salvation, also is orderly. There is a unity in it. There is a structure in it. So in the concluding part of this lecture, let me highlight three other structures the Master Teacher brings together in these seven short statements, structures that are a little bit beyond the Beatitudes, but there are structures that are very much interrelated to the Christian teaching and the Christian truth. Jesus brings them together again in these Beatitudes.

The first one is that the Beatitudes show us that the work of salvation is the work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It's Trinitarian. All three are involved. Now let me illustrate at first that it is a part of the salvation of the Father. The first three reflect the Father's drawing a sinner to Christ, as John 6:44 states, "No man can come to Me," Jesus says, "except the Father which hath sent me draw him." Well, how does the Father draw? How does He bring someone to come to Jesus Christ? Well, He does that opening our eyes for Himself, God Himself, and in reflection, opens our eyes for ourselves. Now, what does this knowledge do? When I compare myself to this great, majestic glory of God and see myself in the light of that, this knowledge brings humility, the first Beatitude, "poor in spirit," it makes me mourn, and it turns me into a meek person. We see the first three dealing with the work of the Father.

Now the fourth one reflects reconciliation with the Father. Again, if we listen to what Jesus says in John 6:45: "Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me." Now the Father that is reflected in the fourth Beatitude is the Father who has reconciled a sinner with Himself by providing His Son as the needed righteousness, and that's where the fourth one comes to.

Now lastly, the fifth, sixth, and seventh Beatitudes reflect the Father's ultimate purpose in predestination. Romans 8:29 states that the purpose of predestination is this, "For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son." In other words, we will be made partakers of God's divine glory in reflecting the nature of His Son again. We had it in our original state, and we will again experience it in salvation. Secondly, the work of salvation is the work of Jesus Christ as a prophet, as a priest, and a king, and all three are again reflected. The first three are the fruit of Jesus' teaching as a prophet. As He's teaching us, we begin to see ourselves, what we are, poor, sinful and guilty, and in reflection of that, we become humble and meek. So those are the three that are the result of His prophetic ministry. The fourth one points to Jesus' priestly ministry. The main work of Jesus Christ as a priest is to provide us the righteousness we need to be accepted with our Creator. That's the fourth one. Now the third office of Jesus is kingly, and Beatitude numbers five, six, and seven are fruit of Christ's kingly work in sanctifying His people. The main purpose in salvation is not comfort. The main purpose of salvation is holiness, God-likeness, or godliness.

Now then thirdly, it is Trinitarian, so we've seen the Father, we have seen the Son, but salvation is also the fruit of the indispensable work of the Holy Spirit. Again, the first three are the fruit of the Holy Spirit, the discovering work of the Spirit, convicting work. What does that convicting work prepare our hearts for but to look and to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ? The whole goal of the Spirit is to glorify Jesus. So He leads then to the fourth Beatitude in which the Holy Spirit's most delightful work is illustrated. His delightful work is to be the Friend of the Bridegroom and to bring the sinner and Jesus together, to reveal Jesus Christ as the only way, truth, and life, as the only hope for us as lost and guilty sinners. As one of the beautiful hymns says, "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross (or to the righteousness of Christ) I cling."

The last three Beatitudes also illustrate the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification. So one other structure that is clearly seen in the Beatitudes is something that is related to the experiential

nature of salvation. Now what, first of all, is meant with experiential salvation or experiential Christianity? Well, let me contrast it first. There is a Christianity, friends, that is mainly historical, mainly intellectual, and many Christians, so-called in the world today, who hold the right doctrines or the right teachings while there is no evidence of a transformation of their heart and of their life. Paul describes, for example, in 1 Corinthians 13 about all those who do all kinds of things and speak heavenly words and do divine miracles, but without charity. That's nothing, that's no Christianity. That is an historical Christianity. Experiential Christianity is when the power of God's truth is experienced in our heart, either as convicting or humbling, transforming, liberating. They do something to us, they change us ultimately. That is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work as He applies each truth to our heart. They become part of us, and we change, we can change radically, we change in repenting from sin and returning to a life that is devoted to God and to others. We will experience the Gospel truth as something elevating, something renewing, something comforting, making us more and more like Jesus Christ. That is experiential.

If we go back now to the Beatitudes, you see this experiential nature of salvation has various distinct aspects that are reflected in the born-again soul and are found here in the Beatitudes. We will be acutely aware of those. The first three—poor, mourn, meek—reflect the experiential pain and the awareness of a sense of our misery, of our lostness, of our guilt against God. Sensing my poverty and my guilt will obviously bring some meekness before God and men. So there you have a sense of misery. The fourth one speaks about deliverance. It reflects the experiential awareness and longing and desire for deliverance which is in Jesus Christ and His righteousness. Now every sinner learns that deliverance only comes through being perfect, and how we can't be—a perfect righteousness is not in us. So that is found in that fourth one. Now in the fifth, sixth, and seventh Beatitudes, they reflect the experiential desire of a thankful heart, having been saved and having been redeemed, pardoned from sin and provided all what there is in Christ. Someone wants to reflect that, and this thankfulness is best expressed in the life of devotion, of being merciful, being sincere of heart, pure in heart and peacemakers.

Lastly, one more structure, the Beatitudes support the teaching of the three main requirements in the Gospel. Now if we listen to the Gospel message as it comes to us in the teachings of the kingdom, the first is a call to repentance toward God, there is a call to faith in Jesus Christ, and, thirdly, there is a call to the obedience of life. Repentance, faith and obedience. Those three, you notice, are beautifully interwoven in the Beatitudes man or woman and his or her life. Look again at the first three—the poor, the mourner, the meek. It is a portrait of a repenting sinner. He or she who has become aware of himself or herself in the sight of God, of the need of Jesus. What is repentance, friends? It's an awareness of sin, it's a turning away from those sins. It's a sorrow over sin. It's a meekness, accepting God's just punishment for sin. Now you have the first three. The fourth one is the portrait of a believing sinner who embraces the offer of grace in Jesus Christ. Now the object of faith is Jesus and His righteousness, and there we have faith, the heart of the believer. Now fifth, sixth and seventh are the portrait of the obedient believer who lives the life of Christ in reflection of Him, loving and doing His commandments. So beautiful are the structures that the Beatitudes together portray.

Now to wrap up this study. I want to share three more concluding observations that are general about each one of the Beatitudes. I don't have to repeat them in each one of the upcoming lectures. First, take note that each Beatitude in the Greek has a verb form that we would call today the present tense with an ongoing activity. In other words, each Beatitude is not just a past, not just a future, it is a present. It isn't just a snapshot from a particular stage of my spiritual journey. No, Jesus says this is the continued picture of the disciples in My kingdom. There is an ongoing experiential reality that every born-again soul feels till the last breath of their life. Just as I am hungry when I'm a baby, I'm hungry when I'm an old man. Just as I live when I'm a baby, I'm alive when I'm an old man. That's an ongoing activity. Also spiritually, there are ongoing experiential aspects to the

spiritual life. Paul, as a great example, shares his ongoing awareness of the indwelling sin which made him poor in spirit, even though he was a giant spiritually. It made him mourn continually, “O wretched man that I am!” It made him meek. That will be the born-again soul’s experience, and that’s why Jesus phrases each of these Beatitudes in the ongoing sense. Paul says he hungered to be found “in Christ, not having mine own righteousness,” he hungered to know Jesus Christ “and the power of His resurrection” (Philippians 3:9–10), and he writes that in one of the last letters he ever wrote in his life. So his life illustrates—as all living souls and saints will experience—the desire, the ongoing desire of these Beatitudes in his life. At the end of Philippians 3, Paul says that he’s looking forward to the return of the Lord Jesus, “Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body” (Philippians 3:21). Therefore, friends, the believer has not arrived until he is brought from grace to glory.

Now, secondly, take note that every Beatitude starts the same—it starts with “blessed are”—and there is a description, and then a promise. Let’s look for a moment at the opening “blessed are.” Jesus’ intention in these Beatitudes is not only to identify the citizens of His kingdom. No, He’s saying, “Blessed are you.” He was to comfort them in the midst of their trials, in the midst of their setbacks, in the midst of their ongoing struggles, in the midst of the accusations, in the midst of their intense longings. He wants to comfort them with His glorious Gospel promises, “Blessed are.” You will inherit a kingdom. You shall be comforted. You shall be filled. You shall obtain mercy. You shall be called the children of God, and you shall be treated as His children. Finally, at last, you shall see God, that means enjoy Him in full communion forever and ever. Praise the Lord, fellow saints! Your journey in this life will go from strength to strength and through the troubles indeed, through the challenges. It goes from grace to grace to grace to grace, and *finally* it will go from grace to glory. “Blessed are” is an ongoing state that the Lord Jesus declares you to be in.

Therefore, take note of these appended statements. Now then, in the end we find two Beatitudes that are slightly different. The seven are followed with two. What is different in those last two? The first seven describe the person in whom Christ is at work. The last two, which are in essence one, describe the reaction of the ungodly world upon Christ’s people and particularly upon Christ’s work in His people. Satan is not ready to give up. He will fight, as the kingdom of darkness, against anything that is Christ and His people, and this rage of Satan will burn now against Jesus’ followers, as he cannot reach Jesus anymore. So be prepared. Jesus says the more Christ-like you are, the more Christ-like your church is, the more you will experience the reviling, the persecuting, the false accusations. The Apostle writes to Timothy, “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12). Peter added to this, in the midst of more persecution, “But and if ye suffer for righteousness’ sake, happy (blessed) are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled” (1 Peter 3:14). So after this overview of the Beatitudes, we are now ready to examine the details of each of them individually. So may God bless this teaching and make us all a blessing to each other. Thank you.