

a different
kind of **HAPPY**



A DIFFERENT KIND OF HAPPY

AN 8 WEEK SERIES ON THE BEATITUDES

The most famous sermon in the history of the world was given by Jesus, and it started with what is known as “The Beatitudes.” It was a message for the ages - and as relevant and needed in this current age as ever. Like water in a desert, find out how these kingdom virtues cause us to flourish in the most unexpected ways.

Join us as we journey through eight weeks of scripture reading, teaching, and reflection. Our prayer is that, during this time, God will deepen your understanding of who he is and his plan for you through his Church.

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HOW TO USE THIS CURRICULUM

This book was created as a companion guide to the Sunday teaching series, *A Different Kind of Happy*, about the Beatitudes. In it, you will find passages of scripture that pertain to the week's Sunday message, as well as spiritual practices that promote relationship building between you and God, and between you and your circle, whether it's home, men's, or women's community circles.

The Beatitudes are a collection of blessings meant to be seen as a whole. Though we'll be looking at one verse per week, the concepts in all weeks overlap in topics and strengthen each other.

The content in this book is designed as a tool to aid you in the process of taking the weekly Sunday message deeper. We do this by slowing down to study scripture, and stepping into practices of spiritual formation that lead to outward action

All passages of scripture found in this book are in the New Living Translation (NLT), unless noted.

WHAT YOU'LL EXPERIENCE

day **01** Study that week's key scripture passage, using provided context from the Old Testament and prompts for reflection.

day **02** Study that week's supporting scripture passage. using provided context from the teachings of Jesus and prompts for reflection.

day **03** Look in through that week's beatitude, using provided prompts for reflection.

day **04** Look out through that week's beatitude, using provided prompts for reflection.

day **05** Look back and reflect on what God is teaching you. Look forward and consider what God is calling you to.

WHAT ARE THE BEATITUDES?

As followers of Jesus, we live in the tension of the in-between – the tension of a Kingdom of God that is here, inaugurated by Jesus’ birth, but is yet to come in fullness when Jesus returns and establishes a new heaven and earth.

The Beatitudes mark the beginning of Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount. It is the largest collection of Jesus’ teaching on how to live in God’s Kingdom, a new kingdom Jesus ushered in, while still living in the reality of a world that is passing away. The blessings Jesus speaks in the Beatitudes expose the tension in which his followers live. How can we live a blessed life right now and still face actual pain, poverty, emptiness, and brokenness?

The temptation is to read the Beatitudes as a formula for a life of blessing, or as a list of virtues or deeds that people need to embody or do. But as theologian Dallas Willard puts it in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, “The Beatitudes simply cannot be ‘good news’ if they are understood as a set of ‘how-tos’ for achieving blessedness. They would then only amount to a new legalism.”

If not a formula to follow, or a list to accomplish, then what are the Beatitudes? Willard calls them “explanations and illustrations, drawn from the immediate setting, of the present availability of the kingdom through personal relationship to Jesus. They single out cases that provide proof that, in him, the rule of God from the heavens truly is available in life circumstances that are beyond all human hope.”

Because of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, the Beatitudes are not a to-do list, but an encouragement to those who follow in the wisdom and ways of Jesus. They describe what God’s Kingdom looks like.

Regardless of time and place, the world devalues and further marginalizes the kind of people Jesus calls out in the Beatitudes. But God's Kingdom is given to those who live in meekness, mercy, and peace with one another – those who value what Jesus values – rather than those who pursue public honor, power, and wealth.

This world is not our forever home, but while we wait for Jesus' return, we have a responsibility. This responsibility is not to earn blessings for ourselves; Jesus did that for us. We are to offer hope and live as salt and light to the world, the light of a kingdom breaking through from within the darkness that would extinguish this world. We are to invite our neighbors "to taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8).

As we study this short but defining passage at the beginning of Matthew 5, may our hearts grow in gratitude toward the God who makes available to us his kingdom through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And as our gratitude grows, may we be quick to invite others to know, love and follow Jesus, who rules with humility, justice, righteousness, joy, and peace.

The blessings of The Beatitudes should challenge us to examine our assumptions about what we value, strive for, and are comfortable with. May these blessings challenge us personally and communally as we seek to cultivate a heart of Jesus in our lives.

WHAT IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

In the Beatitudes, we see God's grace bestowed on those who we would not expect. Rather than the religious, educated, wealthy, and powerful, Jesus turns the human value system upside down. This is a glimpse into what the Kingdom of God is like.

So, what is the Kingdom of God? The Kingdom of God is God's personal rule and reign over all things, including people.

God has always been moving towards restoring all things back into right relationship. God's Kingdom is not like earthly kingdoms, but one of peace, wholeness, goodness, grace, and love, where everyone is invited in order to be fully restored to their God-given potential.

Jesus came to usher in this new kingdom, a world where all things are made new. When we look inward and outward, we see a deep need for the transforming grace of God to bring renewal, and as followers of Jesus, he invites us into the work he has been doing since the very beginning - to bring all things into perfect peace, to restore humanity, and to restore the earth.

Scripture builds from the first book of the Bible in anticipation for Jesus – the long awaited king who will inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth with his first coming and bring the kingdom to its fullness with his return.

Although the phrase “kingdom of God” does not appear in the Old Testament, the concept is present throughout. The following pages feature an overview of what the Old Testament says about the Kingdom of God.

GOD IS THE SOVEREIGN KING OVER ALL

Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty. Everything in the heavens and on earth is yours, O Lord, and this is your kingdom. We adore you as the one who is over all things.

1 Chronicles
29:11

For royal power belongs to the Lord. He rules all the nations.

Psalm
22:28

The Lord rules over the floodwaters.
The Lord reigns as king forever.

Psalm
29:10

HIS KINGDOM IS AN EVERLASTING KINGDOM

Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever. You rule with a scepter of justice.

Psalm
45:6

For your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom. You rule throughout all generations. The Lord always keeps his promises; he is gracious in all he does.

Psalm
145:13

“I decree that everyone throughout my kingdom should tremble with fear before the God of Daniel. For he is the living God, and he will endure forever. His kingdom will never be destroyed, and his rule will never end.

Daniel
6:26

*A PROMISED MESSIAH
WILL BRING THE KINGDOM
AND RULE WITH HUMILITY, JUSTICE,
RIGHTEOUSNESS, JOY, AND PEACE*

The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from his descendants, until the coming of the one to whom it belongs, the one whom all nations will honor.

Genesis
49:10

Look at my servant, whom I strengthen. He is my chosen one, who pleases me. I have put my Spirit upon him. He will bring justice to the nations

Isaiah
42:1

He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal—it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed.

Daniel
7:14

I will remove the battle chariots from Israel and the warhorses from Jerusalem. I will destroy all the weapons used in battle, and your king will bring peace to the nations. His realm will stretch from sea to sea and from the Euphrates River to the ends of the earth.

Zechariah
9:10

*THE PEOPLE OF GOD
WILL INHERIT THE KINGDOM
AND POSSESS IT FOREVER*

Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to me. And you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation.’ This is the message you must give to the people of Israel.”

Exodus
19:5-6

Those who have been ransomed by the Lord will return. They will enter Jerusalem singing, crowned with everlasting joy. Sorrow and mourning will disappear, and they will be filled with joy and gladness.

Isaiah
51:11

All your people will be righteous. They will possess their land forever, for I will plant them there with my own hands in order to bring myself glory.

Isaiah
60:21

But in the end, the holy people of the Most High will be given the kingdom, and they will rule forever and ever.”

Daniel
7:18

...until the Ancient One—the Most High—came and judged in favor of his holy people. Then the time arrived for the holy people to take over the kingdom.

Daniel
7:22

*THE KINGDOM, IN ITS FULLNESS,
IS A SPIRITUAL AND PHYSICAL
REALM IN WHICH THE HEAVENS
AND EARTH ARE RECREATED*

“Look! I am creating new heavens and a new earth, and no one will even think about the old ones anymore.

Isaiah
65:17

“As surely as my new heavens and earth will remain, so will you always be my people, with a name that will never disappear,” says the Lord.

Isaiah
66:22

Fruit trees of all kinds will grow along both sides of the river. The leaves of these trees will never turn brown and fall, and there will always be fruit on their branches. There will be a new crop every month, for they are watered by the river flowing from the Temple. The fruit will be for food and the leaves for healing.”

Ezekiel
47:12

THE MEANING OF “BLESSED”

When Jesus says “blessed are,” he describes the Church. They are the people who form the framework for a kingdom community that lives out its identity in Jesus. When we follow Jesus, we are transformed as we live out the presence of God in our communities – even in our suffering, poverty, mourning, and persecution. God chooses to partner with us through a communal relationship and, by his presence, we are blessed.

It is confusing to hear who Jesus calls blessed. How can we be blessed when life is a struggle? We tend to equate blessed with prosperous – not in need, or experiencing poor health, or suffering loss. New Testament scholar Scot McKnight says, “A ‘blessed’ person is someone who, because of a heart for God, is promised and enjoys God’s favor regardless of that person’s status or countercultural condition.” Enjoying God’s favor does not always mean that adverse conditions will be removed, but rather that the person experiencing the adverse condition will have access to God’s presence in the situation through the Holy Spirit.

Jonathan Pennington states that when Jesus says “blessed are” he is declaring “that a certain way of being in the world produces human flourishing and [happiness].” In his translations of the beatitudes, he replaces the word “blessed” with “flourishing.” And then says, “flourishing is only experienced through...following Jesus’s teachings and life, which situate the disciple into God’s community or kingdom. This is how someone we know can have cancer and live fully into the joy of life. Or another can suffer economic struggles and still be generous in all that they do. This is how James, who lived under persecution as head of the Jerusalem church could say, “when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy...when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.” James 1:2-4

JESUS DOES NOT TELL US THAT WE SHOULD TRY TO BE POOR IN SPIRIT, OR MEEK, OR PEACEMAKERS. HE SIMPLY SAYS THAT MANY WHO ARE CALLED INTO THE KINGDOM WILL FIND THEMSELVES SO CONSTITUTED.

- Stanley Hauerwas, *theologian*

01
week GOD
BLESSES

THOSE WHO WORK FOR PEACE

FOR THEY WILL BE CALLED
THE CHILDREN OF GOD

MATTHEW 5:9 (NET)

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

The word for peace in the Old Testament, *shalom*, has a broader meaning in Hebrew than in English. We think of peace simply as an absence of conflict and a state of quiet calmness, but its meaning embodies a greater sense of well-being. It implies safety, health, and prosperity. *Shalom* also means wholeness or completion, describing something that is fully realized. *Shalom* is more than a state of being, it is also a relational word that describes the impact of mutuality between God, his people, and the land. For example, Isaiah 32:16-20 captures the meaning of *shalom* in describing the restored relationship with God, humanity, and the land when God's people live faithfully.

For example, the restored land was associated with peace between God and humanity, as well as relations between humans, where the well-being of the land was a result of restored relationships. It was symbolic of wholeness, and frequently a picture of future peace and prosperity when God's people were faithful. Isaiah 32:16-20 is one such description which captures the meaning of *shalom*:

Justice will rule in the wilderness and righteousness in the fertile field. And this righteousness will bring peace. Yes, it will bring quietness and confidence [that comes from safety] forever. My people will live in safety, quietly at home. They will be at rest. Even if the forest should be destroyed and the city torn down, the Lord will greatly bless his people. Wherever they plant seed, bountiful crops will spring up. Their cattle and donkeys will graze freely.

Notice the rich language describing the presence of justice. In a land inhabited by justice and righteousness, there is peace—safety, quiet, rest, and blessings from God. Even in tragedy, provision is bountiful.

As with many of the beatitudes, we see an overlap in words that have close connections. Righteousness is often connected to peace. Righteousness implies a right relationship with God; it is a form of imagining him and understanding his will and desires for self and others. Righteous actions flow out of a right relationship with God. In the passage above, the resulting actions are justice for and peace with others and the land. A favorite example where the text pairs these words is found in Psalm 85 where God speaks peace to his faithful people. (v. 8) In the description of the future, the land is a place where “Loyal love and faithfulness meet together. Righteousness and peace kiss one another!” (v. 10) Therefore, when you find righteousness, you also find peace.

Peace was also used to describe relationships characterized by friendship, care, loyalty, and love. People of peace have integrity and their motives are innocent. (Psalm 37:37) You can trust them because they have your well-being in mind. In Psalm 41:9, David uses the term “man of my peace” which is translated as “close friend.” A person of peace has a right relationship with God and looks out for the welfare of others. They are people of truth and justice, but also loyal love and faithfulness. Jeremiah 8 offers a poetic description of the future land where God will plant seeds of prosperity and peace. His people are to speak truth to one another and make just decisions that lead to peace. Peaceful decisions restore well-being, safety, good health, and prosperity to others. God instructs them to love truth and peace.

God is the originator of peace. Throughout the Old Testament, he calls his people to walk in his ways and to be people of peace as his images. Isaiah 9 cites the “Prince of Peace” as a prophetic name for the Messiah. The Messiah is the one who brings God’s Kingdom to completeness, established and sustained through his righteousness and justice. It is a land where he rules with his faithful and peace “has no end.” (vv. 6-7)

1 JOHN 3:1A, 2B-3

See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!

But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is.³ And all who have this eager expectation will keep themselves pure, just as he is pure.

GALATIANS 4:6-7

And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, “Abba, Father.” Now you are no longer a slave but God’s own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir.

JOHN 16:33 (ESV)

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

When Jesus blessed the peacemakers, his audience was a conquered people living in a brutal and exploitative empire. Israel was an occupied colony whose political, military, fiscal, and religious affairs were managed by a small percentage of elites who dominated all aspects of society.

According to New Testament scholar Warren Carter, the ruling class exploited the non-elite masses for their own benefit. Resources, mostly land and labor, were siphoned from the colonies to empower the Empire. They seized the land and exploited cheap labor with slaves and tenant

farmers, then consumed more than half its produce. Then they charged heavy taxes which were paid in goods. The farmer and the fisherman watched as a large portion of their food supplies were taken to support a government that did not reciprocate. Failure to pay taxes was considered rebellion.

Domination and coercion of the masses were through a strong military presence and retaliation was inevitable and ruthless. The values and perceptions of the elite controlled every aspect of society and were in opposition to the centuries-old values of the Jewish people they oppressed.

Is it any wonder that most of Jesus' followers were poor, hungry, and mourning? And that the meek, merciful, and peacemakers were subversive to societal norms?

Ironically, the Romans claimed their rule brought peace and security. But that was only true for a small minority, at the cost of the non-Roman majority. For Jesus' listeners, they longed for the Messiah to come and overthrow the government and set them free.

Living in an oppressive society, where peacemaking qualities were not valued or modeled, one's outlook on and desire to practice peace is a challenge. Rebellions were not uncommon among the devalued people of the Empire. But Jesus's blessing over those who make peace was a reminder of God's values and his expectations in the everyday life of the Empire.

Instead of military or political freedom, Jesus offers his followers shalom that extends beyond the daily life of living in the Empire. He offers them the benefits of being a child of God, heirs to all that belongs to him. And when his children practice peace, they show whose child they are. And others may say, "I see your Father in you."

New Testament authors address peacemaking in everyday life. One of the most practical and timeless pieces of peacemaking wisdom comes from James 3:13, 17-18, the head of the church in Jerusalem and Jesus' brother:

If you are wise and understand God's ways, prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom.

Wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.

LOOK BACK ON TODAY'S DEVOTION & SCRIPTURE REFERENCES AND UNDERLINE OR HIGHLIGHT ACTIONS AND POSTURES THAT LEAD TO PEACE.

As we look inward, this week's beatitude reminds us of who we are in light of Jesus. Use today's prompts to help you notice and name where your heart is today.

Consider this perspective on this week's beatitude:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO WERE ONCE FAR OFF, BUT BECAUSE OF JESUS WERE BROUGHT NEAR, AND ARE AT PEACE WITH GOD.

- In the last six months, how has God found you, rescued you, and brought you near?

COLOSSIANS 1:19-23

For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross. This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions.

As we look outward, this week's beatitude reminds us of who others are in light of Jesus. Use today's prompts to help you see others and the world through God's eyes and pray from that viewpoint.

Consider this perspective on this week's beatitude:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ENTER THE INCONVENIENT WORK OF LOVING TWO SIDES TO BRING ABOUT RECONCILIATION.

- Who comes to mind, in your community or beyond, that would be easier for you to prove wrong than accept as a brother or sister?

EPHESIANS 4:31-32

Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.

1 PETER 3:9

Don't repay evil for evil. Don't retaliate with insults when people insult you. Instead, pay them back with a blessing. That is what God has called you to do, and he will grant you his blessing.

02

week

GOD

BLESSES

THOSE WHO ARE MERCIFUL

FOR THEY WILL BE SHOWN MERCY

MATTHEW 5:7 (NET)

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

EXODUS 34:6 (RSV)

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Merciful is the first in a list of attributes God used to describe himself. Its meaning in the Old Testament is complex because mercy/merciful can be translated from three Hebrew words that have overlapping concepts based on context. They are compassion, grace, and kindness, and flow from God's faithful, loyal, steadfast love and slowness to anger.

Mercy can be an emotion, often translated as compassion or pity. It describes a deep emotional posture God has towards his people. It often evokes a mother's feelings toward her helpless newborn. In Isaiah 49:15, God says to his people, "Can a woman forget her baby who nurses at her breast? Can she withhold compassion from the child she has borne? Even if mothers were to forget, I could never forget you!"

Other times, mercy becomes an action when God's love, compassion, and grace move him to act. In concrete ways, mercy advocates for those who cannot advocate for themselves—the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. Here, mercy looks like tangible acts of care, kindness, and justice. Throughout the Law, God gave instructions to provide for these groups, the psalmists depict God as their rescuer, and the prophets decried their mistreatment and oppression.

In Isaiah 41:17 God says, “When the poor and needy search for water and there is none, and their tongues are parched from thirst, then I, the Lord, will answer them. I, the God of Israel, will never abandon them.”

Active mercy also takes a more internal form as forgiveness. A primary example of divine forgiveness involves his mercy towards the headstrong and rebellious Israelites. Forgiveness becomes part of the cycle of “offend - repent - forgive” in the book of Judges, and it is the message of the prophets. In a sermon to Israel before entering the promised land, Moses prophetically predicts their exile. He then assures them that God will respond mercifully when they seek him with their whole hearts. He declares they will find him and he will return them to the land. (Deuteronomy 4:29-31)

God calls his people to walk in his ways and this emphasis on divine mercy encourages imitation. Micah 6:8 reminds Israel, “The Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” When God’s people respond to and internalize his great mercy and compassion, they walk humbly with him and offer compassionate mercy to others.

MATTHEW 23:23

What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things.

JAMES 2:12-13

So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free. There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you.

Jesus was a man known for mercy, as well as justice and faith. He embodied the character of God and was evidence of God's kingdom on earth. But he did have harsh words for others from time to time. If you are familiar with the Pharisees, you may think of these religious leaders, as well as scribes or experts of the law. Jesus looked harshly on those who knew all the rites and rituals of Judaism but showed no evidence they walked with God; they represented God but did not act like him. They did not reflect outward behaviors of mercy, love, grace, kindness, forgiveness, or justice—signs of whole-hearted devotion to God.

It is likely that many religious leaders were drawn to the predominant culture, where public honor and position were the highest achievements. When value comes from societal standards, judgment rather than justice drives your outward behavior. Those who were in direct opposition to Jesus' values and actions often received harsh words from him because of their lack of mercy towards others.

Once, when Jesus was eating with those who some religious leaders considered unworthy, his disciples were asked why he ate with them. Jesus answered the Pharisees, saying the sick need a physician, not the well. He challenged them to learn what these words from the prophet Hosea mean, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” (Matthew 9:10-13) Incidentally, the host of the dinner was Matthew, considered one of the unworthy. Jesus had just called him to be a disciple and he is the one who recorded the Beatitudes that we study today.

This challenge came up again when he and his hungry disciples ate grain from a field and were accused by Pharisees of breaking the law. Eating someone else’s grain was lawful as long as they gathered just enough to eat. This was one of God’s provisions for the hungry in the Old Testament. (Deuteronomy 23:24-25) But it was the Sabbath and gathering grain was considered to be working. Jesus admonishes these experts of the scripture with scripture, telling them, “If you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.” (Matthew 12:1-8)

Jesus also had positive interactions with religious experts. Once a scribe asked which commandment was most important. Jesus quoted, “God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-6) and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18) The expert was impressed and agreed, “This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law.” Jesus realized this man understood the law and told him he was not far from the Kingdom of God.

Even though mercy was not addressed, the scribe understood that love is more important than rituals. If we love God with all of ourselves, then we love our neighbors as ourselves. Mercy is the outflow of our love. We see our neighbors and their needs and are moved to acts of mercy like Jesus. We may find ourselves paying attention to those society does not. Or if we are those society does not honor and we are seen, we join with others to practice mercy and justice.

- Why do you think Jesus was especially critical of those who represented God but did not act like him?

- What does it mean for God to desire mercy, and not sacrifice? How might that change the way you love and follow Jesus?

As we look inward, this week's beatitude reminds us of who we are in light of Jesus. Use today's prompts to help you notice and name where your heart is today.

Consider this perspective on this week's beatitude:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO RELY ON THE MERCY OF GOD IN THEIR LIVES,
AND RECEIVE IT.

- When you look at your life and the choices you've made, what do you see? What places in your past still need to be accepted and integrated into who you are? How do you prevent yourself from receiving mercy from God? Notice and name the ways below..

TITUS 3:5

...he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit.

As we look outward, this week's beatitude reminds us of who others are in light of Jesus. Use today's prompts to help you see others and the world through God's eyes and pray from that viewpoint.

Consider this perspective on this week's beatitude:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO PAY ATTENTION TO THE HURTING NEIGHBOR, CO-WORKER, OR PASSER-BY, AND CARRY OUT A SMALL ACT OF MERCY.

- Who comes to mind, in your community or beyond, that is hurting and in need of God's own hope, confidence, and delight in their belovedness?

LUKE 10:33-37

“Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, ‘Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I’ll pay you the next time I’m here.’” “Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?” Jesus asked.

The man replied, “The one who showed him mercy.” Then Jesus said, “Yes, now go and do the same.”

03

week

GOD

BLESSES

THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED

FOR DOING RIGHT,
FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS THEIRS

MATTHEW 5:10-12 (NIV)

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

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

LUKE 6:22-23 (NIV)

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you and insult you and reject you as evil on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day; and jump for joy, because your reward is great in heaven. For their ancestors did the same things to the prophets.

In the last beatitudes, Jesus tells his followers they will be persecuted for righteousness like the prophets. In the Old Testament, you may recall the story of Daniel, who was thrown into the lion's den for praying to God and not the king. Or his three friends, thrown into the fiery furnace for worshipping God and not the idol of the king. Or perhaps you think of when the Israelites were persecuted by the nations of Egypt, Moab, Babylon, and Assyria.

The more disobedient Israel became, the more the prophets were persecuted. This was because their wholehearted devotion to a right relationship with God and others that called for repentance and justice stood in stark contrast to those who had a divided devotion and oppressed others. When reading the stories, we find persecution in two main ways. The first is through ridicule and rejection of the prophet and his message. The second is by physical violence enacted on the prophet. Many prophets died because rebellious people did not want to hear their messages. One notable example of persecution of a prophet can be found in Jeremiah. He faces persecution so severe that, though he does not die, he wishes he had never been born.

For Jeremiah, persecution came from priests, prophets, government officials, the king, and perhaps worse, his friends. The people plot against him to use their words to cause harm. Jeremiah is accused multiple times of treason. He is flogged, arrested, and imprisoned, and is a victim of attempted murder. He is thrown in a dungeon without food, then in a prison, then in a cistern mired in the mud and left to starve. He was rescued and placed back in the palace prison where he remained until the city fell to the Babylonians, who released him and set him free. His prophecies came true.

Before imprisonment, Jeremiah laments his experience to God. (Jeremiah 20:7-11) He is a constant laughingstock and everyone ridicules him. God's message has made him an object of continual insults. He hears many whispering words of conspiracy against him and others call out to publicly condemn him. Those who terrorize him are everywhere. He ends his lament by saying, "Even my old friends are watching me, waiting for a fatal slip. "He will trap himself," they say, "and then we will get our revenge on him."

Jeremiah, like most of the prophets of the Old Testament, did not see a better life because of their obedience. Their lives were not blessed with material goods. They were not esteemed by crowds or honored. Instead, they went against the dominant culture. They were a minority with a few others who lived righteously, surrounded by those who refused to love God wholly and follow him exclusively. So when Jesus tells his followers they will be persecuted by the majority who does not accept them, it was not a sales pitch to entice them to follow him. Rather, it was a promise to those who lived underprivileged lives that they were privileged children of the King. It was a promise of hope that one day they would inherit his Kingdom.

EPHESIANS 5:1-2

Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God.

Empire-wide persecution of Christians did not happen until the third century. In the earlier days, Jesus' followers experienced harassment and opposition locally. They were the powerless and oppressed who had no voice, no access to power, and no hope of changing the system. Unlike Jesus, they were not yet a threat to the Roman system.

But they were a threat to those who lived and worked with them. As God-fearers and Jesus followers, the church disavowed Roman religion. To reject your city's gods and refuse involvement in Roman cult celebrations was an act of disloyalty and subversion.

When you refuse to divide your loyalties and instead wholeheartedly choose to "follow a convicted criminal who was once accused of being in league with Satan" (Matthew 10:22, 25; Eklund), you can expect to be ridiculed, rejected, and misunderstood.

When you adopt countercultural standards so that you can live in a manner worthy of a righteous God who denied himself power, honor, and glory so that in his mercy he could suffer in our suffering, you can expect the same. (Hebrews 2:14-18)

We live far removed from imperial Rome. However, when we find ourselves feeling disrespected, insulted, or rejected because of our faith, our instinct says to be ready to fight for what we believe.

The temptation is to use our faith as a weapon of judgment, yet this is not the way of the Kingdom of God. When we do that, we attempt to place ourselves in power over the one who disagrees with us and further the divide between them and us.

Instead, we are to live counter-culturally in imitation of God's righteousness and follow the example of Christ who lived a love-filled life of sacrifice for us and others. (Ephesians 5:1)

We seek God's will despite what others want. We love God so much we remain faithful and loving when misunderstood. We follow Jesus so unreservedly that we suffer for him. McKnight says, "Inherent in persecution, then, are both a love of God and a denial of self."

In Ephesians 3:14-21, Paul prayed this prayer over the church. This prayer is for each one of us who feels the weight of surrender to fully live as Jesus lived, to love with a wholehearted devotion that denies ourselves for the sake of Christ and others, and gives us hope as we lean into the challenges of a life in Christ.

When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit.

Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen.

REREAD THE PRAYER FROM EPHESIANS AND UNDERLINE THE PARTS OF THE PRAYER THAT SPEAK MOST TO YOU ABOUT LIVING A PERSECUTED LIFE THAT FOLLOWS JESUS WHOLEHEARTEDLY IN SELF-SACRIFICE AND LOVE.

As we look inward, this week’s beatitude reminds us of who we are in light of Jesus. Use today’s prompts to help you notice and name where your heart is today.

Consider this perspective on this week’s beatitude:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO CLING TO GOD AND STAND BY HIM IN TRUST THAT HE WILL MAKE ALL THINGS NEW; TO MAKE ALL THINGS RIGHT.

- In the United States, we are free to worship God without the fear of persecution other countries face today. While the cost to our personhood differs depending on country or family of origin, have you ever been wrongly treated or penalized because of who you worship? If so, how did you react? If not, what would it take to honor relationships with people who don’t share your faith?

REVELATION 21:4-5

He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.” And the one sitting on the throne said, “Look, I am making everything new!” And then he said to me, “Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true.”

They do not belong to this world any more than I do. Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth. Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world. And I give myself as a holy sacrifice for them so they can be made holy by your truth. "I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message.

Look through the notes you jotted down in the question above. As you examine your heart, be with your feelings; don't try to change them or make them acceptable. Ask God to help you meet the challenge of honoring those relationships.

When we face opposition because of our faith, we can become defensive and let our ego, rather than the spirit of Jesus, be at work in our minds, hearts, and actions. It's in these moments that we cling to God's sovereignty and pray, "your kingdom come [in me now], your will be done on earth [by me] as it is in heaven."

Welcome Jesus into your heart in these four prayers:

- Jesus, I let go of my need to be safe and secure. Welcome.
- Jesus, I let go of my need to be accepted and approved of. Welcome.
- Jesus, I let go of my need to control this person or event. Welcome.
- Jesus, I let go of my need to change reality and receive it as it is.

As you examine your heart, be aware of your feelings. Don't try to change them or make them acceptable. Offer them up to God. Talk to him about them.

Consider this perspective on this week's beatitude:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE PASSION IS TO SEE GOD IN THE FACE OF JESUS AND SEE TO IT THAT RIGHTEOUSNESS IS DONE IN THIS WORLD, EVEN AT THEIR OWN COST.

- Become more aware of those around the world who are facing persecution for the sake of Jesus. As you read and grow in understanding and compassion for those suffering because of their love for Jesus, what are ways you can stand in solidarity with them?

ROMANS 8:26-27

And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will.

04

week

GOD

BLESSES

THOSE WHOSE HEARTS ARE PURE

FOR THEY WILL SEE GOD

MATTHEW 5:8 (NET)

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

PSALM 24:3-6 (NIV)

Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god. They will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God their Savior. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, God of Jacob.

Who is “the pure in heart”? And what does it mean to “see God”? Psalm 24:3-6 aligns with both phrases in this week’s beatitude and offers background to Jesus’ blessing. Understanding the vocabulary and context of the poet’s words in the psalm offers clarification for the beatitude. Read the verses above a few times before we analyze them.

Verse 3. Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?

David, the psalmist, explores who is worthy to meet with God by alluding to Moses, who spoke face to face with God and stood on the mountain in his presence. (Exodus 33:1, 14-22)

Verse 4a. The one who has clean hands and a pure heart

He begins the answer by stating those who are worthy of being in God’s presence seek him—outwardly by their actions (clean hands) and inwardly by their thinking (a pure heart). In the Old Testament “heart” describes the inner person; it is the center of thought and will (power of control over thinking and actions), rather than the center of emotion. The NET translates it as “motive.”

Verse 4b. *who does not trust in an idol*

David continues his answer with the next phrase. What the NIV translated as “trust in an idol” says more formally in Hebrew, “lift his heart to emptiness.” This would be the person who does not worship empty things. In the Old Testament, that would be idols.

Verse 4c. *or swear by a false god.*

The next phrase reads more closely as “he does not swear deceitfully.” The Dictionary of Biblical Languages: Hebrew describes this as “the state or condition of deliberately misleading,” creating a “false view in either words or actions.”

The Hebrew text shows these phrases are connected in meaning. This would describe a person who swears allegiance to God, and goes through the motions of worship but serves “empty things” as well. It is a false faithfulness to God when he is not the only object of devotion. This was a direct violation of the first commandment, one that was frequently broken and a cause for exile.

Verse 5a. *They will receive blessing from the Lord*

The result of clean hands and a pure heart, and faithfulness to God and others, is that “he will carry a blessing from Yahweh.” The blessing, or promise of flourishing and peace, is not just something you receive and then move on from, but something you carry with you into all circumstances.

Verse 5b. *and vindication [righteousness, justice] from God their Savior.*

A more direct translation for “vindication” is “righteousness” or “justice.” The word used in Hebrew can be translated either way and the meanings of the two are intertwined. The verse could mean when one “carries” righteousness from God, they are in a right relationship with him and because of him. And if one “carries” justice from God, they are people who do what is right by God and others.

Verse 6a. *Such is the generation of those who seek him,*

David ends the stanza by saying those who experience God’s presence are those who “seek him.” This word for “seek” is used when a deity is consulted, so the seeker relies on God’s wisdom and knowledge, rather

Verse 6b. *who seek your face, God of Jacob.*

This phrase seems to be a slightly modified repetition of the first, but the poet uses a different word for “seek” than in the previous phrase. Here, “seek” is a purposeful action with the intention to find. Hebrew is a visual language, so this phrase provides a clear picture. It implies the one seeking God’s face actively pursues his presence, like a soon-to-be newlywed who cannot quit looking at the face of their beloved and cannot get enough of their presence. This seeking is the same word and concept in Deuteronomy 4:29. Moses tells Israel they will feel far from his presence in exile, “But from there you shall seek Yahweh your God and will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul.” His presence will be with them even in difficult circumstances.

According to the psalm, those with pure hearts seek God’s presence intentionally, faithfully, and earnestly—and he is found. The pure-hearted person carries God’s blessing and righteousness (or justice) into any circumstance, where flourishing occurs. The one with a pure heart has a right relationship with God and others, especially when life is difficult.

- In verse 4b, “trust in idols” is translated into ancient Israel’s context. But the text reads “who does not lift his heart to emptiness.” In your life, under what circumstances are you most likely “to lift your heart to things that are empty?” How could you invite God into these areas of your life? Ask him to partner with you.

LUKE 11:39-41 (NET)

But the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools! Didn't the one who made the outside make the inside as well? But give from your heart to those in need, and then everything will be clean for you. inside also?"

1 TIMOTHY 1:5

The purpose of my instruction is that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and genuine faith.

JAMES 1:27

Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.

IN THE WEEK ON THE BEATITUDE OF MERCY, WE SEE AN OVERLAP IN TOPICS WITH THIS ONE. IF YOU HAVE NOT DONE THAT WEEK YET, IT IS NOT NECESSARY FOR THIS WEEK. THE CONCEPTS IN ALL WEEKS STRENGTHEN EACH OTHER AND DO NOT NEED TO BE DONE IN A CERTAIN ORDER.

Jesus was known to interact adversely from time to time with religious leaders whose outward judgmental behaviors betrayed their inward lack of mercy. They did not match David's description of people with clean hands and pure hearts, even though they represented God's law. In Luke 11, Jesus has one of these interactions that addresses the state of their hearts.

Jesus was invited to dinner at the home of a Pharisee and did not perform the ritual washing required by Jewish custom, to which the host

responded. Jesus answered by comparing the religious leaders to dirty dishes. If they washed the outside, the inside was still dirty and not fit for eating and drinking. But if they focused on keeping the inside clean, then there is no need to perform ritual cleaning on the outside. It is the inside cleanness that makes them acceptable.

The ritual of handwashing before a meal was not mandatory. It originated with a requirement for temple priests to wash their hands and feet before entering the temple of God's presence, as a symbol of their purity. The religious leaders of Jesus' day often extended rituals and requirements as a precaution, to ensure they were always ritually clean and able to attend temple rites. The intentions were good, but some lost sight of their purpose, and the resulting rules became burdensome. What Jesus is saying is that ritual purity had no relationship to what was truly pure. It was the state of the person's heart—their thoughts and intentions, their heart for him—that made them acceptable to God.

New Testament authors Paul and James understood this. In their letters, they address the issue of a pure heart and its effect on one's behaviors. Paul connects the pure heart with a clear conscience and genuine faith. The result is love. James does not use the word "heart," but he talks of pure religion, which encompasses beliefs (heart) and practices (hands). As a result, the person with clean hands and heart cares about the things God cares about and acts on their behalf.

Lastly, Jesus compares his relationship with his followers to a grapevine. In John 15:2-4 he says, "You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me." In comparing this passage with yesterday's psalm, verse 5b in the ESV translation says, "He will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation." It is important to note from where one's righteousness and good works come. Our purity is not because we do good things, but because the purity of his presence guides us to do good. This is how we see God now.

As we look inward, this week's beatitude reminds us of who we are in light of Jesus. Use today's prompts to help you notice and name where your heart is today.

Consider this perspective on this week's beatitude:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO SEEK GOD SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY WANT TO KNOW, LOVE, AND FOLLOW HIM BECAUSE HE IS BEAUTIFUL AND WORTHY OF OUR PRAISE.

- How does taking time to notice and delight in God enhance your enjoyment and worship of him? What happens to you when you go without regular rhythms that allow you to delight in God? Notice and name them.

PSALM 63:1

O God, you are my God; I earnestly search for you. My soul thirsts for you; my whole body longs for you in this parched and weary land where there is no water.

As we look outward, this week's beatitude reminds us of who others are in light of Jesus. Use today's prompts to help you see others and the world through God's eyes and pray from that viewpoint.

Consider this perspective on this week's beatitude:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO THROUGH SMALL ACTS OF MERCY AND LOVE TOWARDS OTHERS SEEK TO CULTIVATE A HEART OF JESUS THAT GRIEVES OVER A BROKEN WORLD.

- Who comes to mind, in your community or beyond, that is in need or in pain and has yet to know Jesus?

MATTHEW 9:36-38

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He said to his disciples, "The harvest is great, but the workers are few. So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields."

05

week

GOD

BLESSES

THOSE WHO MOURN

FOR THEY WILL BE COMFORTED

MATTHEW 5:4 (NET)

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

LUKE 6:21B (NET)

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh

In the Gospel of Luke, we see Jesus reading the scroll of Isaiah, declaring he was the one “to bring good news to the poor.” This prediction is found in Isaiah 61:1. Verse 2 says he came “to comfort all in mourning.”

Throughout the Old Testament, we encounter the form of grief communicated in Isaiah 61, which depicts two kinds of loss.

The first is the loss of a dear loved one, expressed by great sorrow during the time of the burial, which we read about in these passages:

- » Jacob is inconsolable when he believes he’s lost his favorite child. (Genesis 37:35)
- » Joseph, that same son reunited, loses his father a second time to death. (Genesis 50:10-11)
- » Israel loses Moses—their liberator, leader, teacher, pastor, prophet, advocate, guide, and mediator. (Exodus 34:29-30, 33-35)
- » Bathsheba loses her husband Uriah after David arranges his death to cover his actions. (1 Samuel 11:27)

IF ONE OF THESE CIRCUMSTANCES RESONATES WITH YOU,
READ THE STORY FOUND IN THE SCRIPTURE REFERENCES.

- Have you experienced great sorrow and mourning over the loss of a loved one? Describe what gave you comfort during that time, or ways to give comfort to someone mourning based on your experiences, both positive and negative.

The second type of loss depicted is caused by calamity, hardship, and adversity. It is a collective loss and mourning that involves the whole community and is often caused by bad choices. Listed are examples that led Israel into collective mourning:

- » **The loss of God's presence.** God says he will give Israel the land he promised and will send an angel with them, but he will not travel among them. (Exodus 32:1-33:4)
- » **The loss of a dream.** The people find out they will wander the wilderness, experiencing a life of hardship instead of the good life of the promised land. (Numbers 13:25-14:39)
- » **The loss of position and privilege.** The prophets warn of destruction and exile from their land, which means the people will no longer live among the nations as God's chosen people. (Lamentations 1, 5; Jeremiah 12)

» **The loss of what was once taken for granted.** After years of exile, some Jews return to their land, and “The Book of the Law of God” is read and explained to the people for the first time in over seventy years. (Nehemiah 8:8-10)

- Have you ever experienced a loss caused by calamity, hardship or adversity? Write your experiences below. Take special note of how you experienced God’s comfort and blessing even in the midst of hardship.

- Choose one of the above examples to read. What do you learn about how God engages with his people? What brings you comfort? What leaves you with questions? Spend some time thanking God for his comfort and bring him your questions.

The good news is that these losses were not total or permanent. We read throughout the Old Testament that with repentance (a turning caused by remorse, grief, or sorrow for one’s actions), God is ready to restore his people because of a faithful, covenant love for them. If we keep reading we see this in the passages above. It is the same for us today. The greatest comfort we can receive is knowing God’s presence is with us when we mourn.

The ultimate giving of comfort is what the prophets foresaw when the Messiah (Jesus) ushers in the Kingdom. He begins the process that finally leads to eternal comfort and restoration, not only of his people but of all creation. Jeremiah 31 describes this final restoration. The whole chapter is worth reading to see God’s love for his people, even when they rebel. Verse 13 offers a taste of what is to come as it relates to the blessing of those in mourning. “The young women will dance for joy, and the men—old and young—will join in the celebration. I will turn their mourning into joy. I will comfort them and exchange their sorrow for rejoicing.” (v. 13)

- Think back over the past couple of years, a season of collective and communal loss and hardship. As the losses we have all experienced come to mind, how do these promises of God’s ultimate presence and comfort shift your perspective of those circumstances? Record some of your thoughts below.

ROMANS 12:15 (NIV)

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

Various circumstances made life harsh for the average person in Jesus' day. Although many lived longer, the working-class person could expect to live to the age of 30-35. In addition to a scarcity of food and deplorable living conditions, many men and women did hard labor. These jobs were for the poorest of people. Days off to rest the body was not a Roman practice, so young bodies suffered the trauma of overwork and aging joints. One-third of infants died before the age of one, and half of children before the age of 10. Death from childbearing was common. Even pregnancy carried greater risk. It is no wonder that Jesus regularly encountered death and mourning during his short ministry and interceded at times, exemplifying what we are directed to do in Romans 12:15. The stories below tell of Jesus' compassion that brings restoration.

LUKE 7:11-16

Soon afterward Jesus went with his disciples to the village of Nain, and a large crowd followed him. A funeral procession was coming out as he approached the village gate. The young man who had died was a widow's only son, and a large crowd from the village was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart overflowed with compassion. "Don't cry!" he said. Then he walked over to the coffin and touched it, and the bearers stopped. "Young man," he said, "I tell you, get up." Then the dead boy sat up and began to talk! And Jesus gave him back to his mother. Great fear swept the crowd, and they praised God, saying, "A mighty prophet has risen among us," and "God has visited his people today."

Not only did Jesus restore a son to his mother, but he restored her life as well. A widow with no one, as she was described, had no means to care for herself in her old age and had to rely on strangers for daily subsistence. There was no welfare or help from the Roman government. Assuming the

As we look outward, this week's beatitude reminds us of who others are in light of Jesus. Use today's prompts to help you see others and the world through God's eyes and pray from that viewpoint.

Consider this perspective on this week's beatitude:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PAYING ATTENTION TO ALL THAT IS HORRIBLE IN THE WORLD, INTERNALIZING IT, AND GRIEVING IT.

- Who comes to mind, in your community or beyond, that is in danger, suffering, or living out costly love?

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-5

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ.

06

week

GOD

BLESSES

THOSE WHO ARE POOR

AND REALIZE THEIR NEED FOR HIM,
FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS THEIRS

MATTHEW 5:3 (NET)

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.

LUKE 6:20 (NIV)

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

To Jesus' Jewish followers, fair treatment, care, and inclusion of the poor was an expectation in the Old Testament Law. This law contained God's instructions and regulations for how God's people were to live in relationship to him, a holy God. In these instructions, provisions were made for those who had no family to support them and were unable to adequately provide for themselves because they lived in an agricultural society but owned no land (Deuteronomy 10:17-19, 14:28-29). The stipulations were for landowners to offer care, fair treatment, and work opportunities for those living in their community. (Deuteronomy 24:14-15, 19-22)

Those who relied on support from landowners included widows and orphans. The Levites, the priestly tribe who served in the temple and were responsible for its upkeep, owned no land and also relied on the landowners' tithes and offerings. And many foreigners, who had no family connections in a society where tribes and clans looked out for one another, were also in this group after leaving their homelands to seek work during hard times. Each of these groups were to be connected to the households of the landowners in their communities and included in religious feast days as part of the family. (Deuteronomy 16:10-12)

These groups were not to be marginalized or taken advantage of, but given the dignity they deserved. They may have been poor, but if those with privilege leveraged their positions for the well-being of all, they would not be poor in spirit as well.

Consider these Old Testament instructions regarding the poor:

DEUTERONOMY 15:7-11

...do not be hard-hearted or tightfisted toward them. Instead, be generous ... and lend them whatever they need. Do not be mean-spirited ... Give generously to the poor, not grudgingly; for the Lord your God will bless you in everything you do. There will always be some in the land who are poor. That is why I am commanding you to share freely with the poor and with other Israelites in need.

Also, notice God's posture towards the poor in Hannah's song:

1 SAMUEL 2:8A (NASB)

*He raises the poor from the dust,
He lifts the needy from the garbage heap
To seat them with nobles,
And He gives them a seat of honor as an inheritance;*

LUKE 4:16B-21

...he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures. The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released,
that the blind will see,
that the oppressed will be set free,
and that the time of the Lord’s favor has come.”*

He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. Then he began to speak to them. “The Scripture you’ve just heard has been fulfilled this very day!”

MATTHEW 11:4-6 (NET)

Jesus answered them, “Go tell John what you hear and see: The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them—and blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me!”

While Jesus’ audience may have been familiar with God’s heart for the poor, Jesus’ words on the mountain were electrifying. The Jewish people had existed in two cultures for generations. This generation lived under harsh Roman rule, in a world where they were not valued. Ethnically they were not Roman. Unlike their Roman neighbors, their religion served one God rather than many. Their politics centered on God’s biblical law and, as most were noncitizens, they had no involvement in government. Life was a struggle for these marginalized people living in their own land, ruled and overtaxed by oppressive leaders.

For those living in cities, conditions were deplorable and unsafe, and food could be scarce. A larger percentage of the population lived in the countryside where life was harsh and the poor were often worked to death. Author and scholar Carla Works cites Bruce Longenecker's study on poverty in ancient Rome. He estimates that 80% of the population in the Roman world was poor. One-third experienced subsistence living, including small-farm families, some laborers and artisans, most merchants and traders, and small shop and tavern owners. Shockingly, one quarter of the population was considered the poorest of the poor, where life was unsustainable. This group included some farm families, unattached widows, orphans, beggars, disabled, unskilled day laborers, and prisoners.

So when Jesus teaches his followers what kind of people are important in the kingdom of God and leads with "poor in spirit," he is speaking to them, the poor, marginalized majority and not the half percent of the wealthy elite who ruled them. Jesus gives his disciples hope and dignity. He sees them. He is one of them. They may be poor, but they do not have to be poor in spirit. In spite of the oppression, they can flourish in God's kingdom. They understand Jesus' values are aligned with God's and opposed to Rome's. He is definitely a prophet from God. Could he be the one—the long-awaited Messiah?

- How do Jesus' words in this week's beatitude align with the two passages above?

As we look inward, this week's beatitude reminds us of who we are in light of Jesus. Use today's prompts to help you notice and name where your heart is today.

Consider this perspective on this week's beatitude:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO RECOGNIZE THEIR LOWLY CONDITION APART FROM JESUS, AND COUNT IT ALL AS LOSS APART FROM HIM.

- What is most important to you? What gives you a sense of security and self-worth? Notice and name those things here.

PHILIPPIANS 3:7-9

I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith.

As we look outward, this week’s beatitude reminds us of who others are in light of Jesus. Use today’s prompts to help you see others and the world through God’s eyes and pray from that viewpoint.

Consider this perspective on this week’s beatitude:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO SEE, VALUE, AND DRAW IN THE PEOPLE NOBODY ADMIRES, LOOKS TO, OR THINKS OF AS IMPORTANT, ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY ARE BOUND TO A DIFFICULT FINANCIAL SITUATION.

- Who comes to mind, in your community or beyond, as someone whom our society places as less important, less valued, less admired, and is left out of the “in” circles?

JAMES 2:2-5 (NLV)

What if a man comes into your church wearing a gold ring and good clothes? And at the same time a poor man comes wearing old clothes. What if you show respect to the man in good clothes and say, “Come and sit in this good place”? But if you say to the poor man, “Stand up over there,” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” are you not thinking that one is more important than the other? This kind of thinking is sinful. Listen, my dear Christian brothers, God has chosen those who are poor in the things of this world to be rich in faith. The holy nation of heaven is theirs. That is what God promised to those who love Him.

07

week

GOD

BLESSES

THOSE WHO ARE HUMBLE

FOR THEY WILL INHERIT
THE WHOLE EARTH

MATTHEW 5:5 (NET)

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

PSALM 37:11 (ESV)

But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace.

Interpreters through the ages have recognized Psalm 37 as the background for Jesus' third blessing. Notice the parallels in the two verses above. If you looked either of these up in different translations, you'd find a variety of word choices for "meek." In the Old Testament, options are humble, lowly, weak, oppressed, afflicted, or poor. They all have their origins in the same word that refers to those who are oppressed, and they are all in keeping with the spirit of Jesus' Beatitudes. Those who "own the world" are not those who we naturally think of as the blessed ones.

New Testament scholar Scot McKnight explains that the meek are "*those who suffer and who have been humbled, and yet they do not seek revenge but God's glory and the welfare of others. In other words, they lovingly trust God and hope in God's timing and God's justice.*"

In exploring Psalm 37 further, we get this same idea. "Inheriting the land" occurs four more times. By observing who will inherit or possess the land, we gain insight into those associated with the meek. They:

- » wait patiently, yet eagerly for the Lord to act, rather than resort to anger to prosper (vv. 7-9)
- » are righteous (just) and gracious, who give to those in need; blessed by the LORD (vv. 21b-22)
- » are the righteous (just) who are faithful (vv. 28-29) wait for the LORD and keep his ways (v. 34)
- » wait for the LORD and keep his ways (v. 34)

MATTHEW 11:29

Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle [meek, lowly] at heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Today we begin with another definition that helps us understand “the meek.” Theology professor Rebekah Eklund proposes that meekness can be understood as a kind of power that involves loving self-restraint in addition to the ability to resist certain pressures, such as violence, materialism, or racism. It involves yielding to others as self-sacrifice for a person who is suffering.

The New Testament synonym for meek is gentle, but that still does not capture the idea of restrained power that Eklund expresses. Theologian Monika Hellwig describes meekness as a nonviolent action to address injustice. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., one a lawyer and the other a pastor, each exhibited meekness to fight their causes, insisting on nonviolence to create enduring political change.

The only two in the Bible who are called meek by name are Moses and Jesus. They are primary examples of meekness. Both possessed great power from God. Yet, instead of using power for personal gain, their power helped the lives of those they led flourish. Their power also put them in danger. Moses was protected, but Jesus was not. And that was part of God’s plan.

The author of Hebrews points out, as faithful and worthy as Moses was, there is no comparison to Jesus. (3:1-6) His meekness caused eternal and wide-reaching change for all humanity. The very act of Jesus becoming a man was one of meekness. Consider Paul's words about this:

PHILIPPIANS 2:6-8 (NIV)

Being in very nature God, he did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Jesus knowingly chose to come into the world as a vulnerable person—a small baby born into a poor family in an oppressive society. He was a foreigner in his own country, a lowly laborer, an itinerant who had no home. He did not seek the honor that comes from wealth and position. Rather, he gave up his privilege and yielded his power to die the death of criminals and slaves, so others could flourish.

According to the above definitions, Jesus was meek. He came into a suffering world and yielded his power to humanity in self-sacrifice. While Jesus' first-century audience longed for the Messiah to come and take back their land from the Romans so they could live in peace, that is not the salvation they received. God had a better idea—one with lasting benefits for an eternity of flourishing in the new earth that was to come. But right now, we live in the in-between. The kingdom is here, but not fully. Yet even now, we have access to God's presence and have been given the means to flourish even in our present suffering.

As we look inward, this week's beatitude reminds us of who we are in light of Jesus. Use today's prompts to help you notice and name where your heart is today.

Consider this perspective on this week's beatitude:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO WAIT AND TRUST IN GOD FOR THEIR ALL,
WHETHER THEY HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE IT OR NOT.

- List the ways that you handle failure and weakness, suffering and loss. What does this tell you about how you connect with and adapt to the world's view of success, power, and self-worth?

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8

You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.

As we look outward, this week's beatitude reminds us of who others are in light of Jesus. Use today's prompts to help you see others and the world through God's eyes and pray from that viewpoint.

Consider this perspective on this week's beatitude:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE DEEPLY BOTHERED BY THOSE THAT SOCIETY HAS MADE UNIMPORTANT, AND DON'T HAVE THE POWER TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT.

- Who comes to mind, in your community or beyond, that is battling illness, job loss, poverty, lack of resources, or hardships they don't have the power to change?

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-4

Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose.

Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.

08

week

GOD

BLESSES

THOSE WHO HUNGER

AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS,
FOR THEY WILL BE SATISFIED

MATTHEW 5:6 (NIV)

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

LUKE 6:21A (NET)

Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.

Matthew's record of Jesus' words can be read as having a timeless spiritual meaning. Luke's telling seems material and immediate. It can be confusing to know what Jesus was communicating, but by looking at the Old Testament we find the gospel writers' words are not as far apart as we may think.

The Bible does not always make clear distinctions between physical and spiritual realities. They are often intertwined so that the reader sees how God operates in both the sacred and mundane. Eating and drinking were physical in the Old Testament narratives, but they often had a spiritual component.

When the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, they had forgotten God's miracles of provision. They complained, so he sent manna, food that literally fell from heaven. Families were to take only what they needed each day. Manna provided for their physical needs, but it also served as a spiritual reminder of God's constant daily provision. When Moses encouraged the later generation to obey God's commands, he reminded them of the wilderness experience. Recounting the manna story he says, "people do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." (Deuteronomy 8:3) So the story of manna as daily provision becomes a reminder of the provision God gives in his instructions for flourishing.

JOHN 6:35

Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty:

MARK 6:41-44 (NIV)

Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

Hunger has been a reality as long as humanity has lived outside the Garden, both physically and spiritually. For Jesus and his followers, it was a tangible, physical, personal reality. It is estimated that 80-99% of those living under Roman rule were poor and one-third lived below subsistence level. This means that most of the crowds who came to hear Jesus were poor and some barely made it from day to day. For some, daily living was one of desperation and food scarcity.

This gives perspective on why Jesus had the compassion to feed such a large crowd rather than send them away to find food, and why only one boy in a crowd of thousands had a few loaves and fish. Jesus fed a truly hungry crowd to satisfaction, with more than enough – enough to feed his disciples another day.

Because of their physical hunger, Jesus' listeners also hungered for righteous justice. They looked for a leader who would free them from the burden of poverty in an oppressive society, where they and their neighbors longed to be physically satisfied.

This explains why the satiated crowd, experiencing the power of the miracle, wanted to turn Jesus “the prophet” into their earthly king. (John 6:14-15)

Understanding the physical hunger and thirst of his followers gives more significance to the many stories of Jesus and food. He symbolized himself as bread, water, or wine because it was a need people understood, a physical need that overlapped with their spiritual need for him.

Jesus delighted in filling the boats of his disciples with fish. He structured his last time with them before his arrest so they could share the Passover meal, a meal that still has spiritual meaning today. Jesus’ last time with his beloved disciples in bodily form involved providing and cooking breakfast one last time. To Jesus and his followers, the phrase “give us this day, our daily bread” had greater significance than some of us can understand, and some of us know well. Like manna from heaven, daily meals remind us that God protects and God provides.

The link between physical and spiritual hunger and thirst is an intimate one. The challenge to see the overlap happens when our social locations have separated the two. Wealthy societies seem to have lost spiritual connection with their physical needs. When you are self-sufficient, you may be tempted to believe you do not need God. Yet those cultures experiencing physical hunger and thirst remain in touch with their needs and so recognize their need for spiritual food as well. Theologian Paul Metzger asks, “How will you ever hunger and thirst for righteousness if you take clean water for granted?” Perhaps humanity still hungers and thirsts because those who have the means to feed and offer clean water do not realize their separation from God’s presence. And it’s why Jesus fed those he could because, in him, God’s presence was physically with them.

As we look inward, this week’s beatitude reminds us of who we are in light of Jesus. Use today’s prompts to help you notice and name where your heart is today.

Consider this perspective on this week’s beatitude:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO LONG FOR THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD TO BE MADE RIGHT.

- Part of moving from self sufficiency to reliance on God is practicing confession. Does your confession tend to be along the lines of “forgive my sins, Lord” rather than specifically naming your sins one by one before God? What does the lack of specific confession do to self-awareness? Name your sins here.

ROMANS 3:22-24

We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard. Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins.

As we look outward, this week's beatitude reminds us of who others are in light of Jesus. Use today's prompts to help you see others and the world through God's eyes and pray from that viewpoint.

Consider this perspective on this week's beatitude:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO SEE A WORLD THAT ISN'T DOING RIGHT BY EACH OTHER, AND HAVE A VISCERAL LONGING FOR GOD TO MAKE THINGS RIGHT FOR ALL.

- Who comes to mind, in your community or beyond, that is facing injustice? Injustice is present most often in the lives of the poor, the houseless, the refugee, the oppressed, and many more.

1 JOHN 3:7

*Dear children, don't let anyone deceive you about this:
When people do what is right, it shows that they are righteous,
even as Christ is righteous.*

HEBREWS 13:3

*Remember those in prison, as if you were there yourself.
Remember also those being mistreated, as if you felt their pain
in your own bodies.*

ISAIAH 1:17

*Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed.
Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows.*

Intentionally come into the presence of God. Become quiet and attentive.

Talk to Jesus about each of the people you listed.

- Does Jesus say anything to you about those who come to mind?
- Ask him “What do they need?”

- Consider your responsibility before God for what you own. How could you share your gifts with others? Could you tutor? Could you help settle a refugee family? Could you teach someone English? List your thoughts below.

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