



Reflecting on the
Beatitudes
Matthew 5:1-12

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Chapter One: Introduction

‘Blessed’: the latest religious buzzword

Have you noticed that it has become popular for people from all religions (and even those who don’t hold to any specific religion) to use the word ‘blessed’ – either of themselves or what they wish for others? Typically, when something good happens to themselves or others, they call this ‘being blessed.’

In Matthew chapter 5, the Lord Jesus describes those who are blessed. These are commonly called the beatitudes, from the Latin *beati sunt* (blessed are...).

The Lord Jesus, however, says some unexpected things that turn the thinking of the world upside down on what it means to be blessed.

A sermon from Jesus

The Sermon on the Mount is most likely the first recorded sermon of Jesus. It covers three chapters in Matthew. It is recorded very early in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

An interesting question to consider is what topic(s) Jesus would speak on in His first sermon. He (the eternal Son of God) came down from heaven and was born as a man in Bethlehem. He lived for around thirty years before starting

His public ministry. In Matthew 5 we find Him starting His public ministry as the Messiah. All this was part of God's eternal plan to save sinners. Israel had waited long for this promise. Now that He had arrived, what would be the first subject that He speaks on?

If you were asked to travel to a far land and preach a sermon to the people living there, what would you preach on? Some possible options different Christians may choose include:

- God's power
- How to find your spiritual gifts
- Spiritual warfare
- Election and Predestination
- The end times
- The Holy Spirit
- How to develop a personal (Christian) mission statement

The list could go on.

The importance of Christian character

How interesting that Jesus starts His first sermon with the beatitudes, a list of *character* qualities that describe a blessed man.

Two reasons can be given why Jesus chose to speak on Christian character. Firstly, the Pharisees and Sadducees had created immense confusion and distortions to true, biblical

religion. They had minute little laws about almost everything. Religion had been reduced to checklists, pedantic precision and man-made rules. In such a climate, legalism and hypocrisy abounded. So the average Jew would have a totally distorted idea about how true religion that was pleasing to God looked.

Secondly, following on from the first point, the beatitudes show the importance of Christian character to God. At the heart of what it means to be a true, born again Christian is Christian character. Issues such as spiritual gifts, achievements, intellectual knowledge of doctrine and doing signs and wonders are secondary. After all, Jesus went on to tell the people that at the end of the day true Christians are known by their fruit, not by their spiritual gifts (Matt. 7:21ff).

The first topic of the first sermon of Jesus therefore reflects the importance of the subject of Christian character, that the Christian church desperately needs to reconsider the emphasis it puts on certain topics, and that Christian character forms the fundamental basis of what it means to be a Christian. We have to pay attention to the beatitudes. They were certainly very important to Jesus.

Is there an order to the beatitudes?

The beatitudes contain eight qualities or character traits that are essential to what it means to be a Christian.

Most commentators agree the order is not random, and that there are some links between the beatitudes. Some of these links will be mentioned as the individual beatitudes are described and discussed.

However, by way of example, the first beatitude speaks to being poor in spirit. This describes a deep humility before God, and how a believer views themselves before a holy God. This deep humility explains why they mourn (second beatitude) and why they are meek (third beatitude). Being poor in spirit is therefore foundational for the Christian life, and gives rise to the other qualities found in the life of a Christian.

Picking our beatitudes?

Some people favour certain beatitudes to live their lives by (as a type of moral code) and ignore the rest. Their thinking is most likely that if they have some form of resemblance to one of the beatitudes in their lives, then they are religious or spiritual enough to satisfy their conscience (and God)! For example, some people give money to the poor (and so believe they are being merciful according to the fifth beatitude), but have no interest in mourning for sin (second beatitude). It needs to be pointed out that a true Christian will reflect all the beatitudes in their life to some extent. Two reasons can be given for this assertion.

Firstly, it is inherent in the way the Lord Jesus has worded the beatitudes and how they are expressed. For example, the

first beatitude indicates that the poor in spirit are blessed because they inherit the kingdom of heaven. This must mean that *only* those who are poor in spirit will inherit the kingdom of heaven. The reason why the poor in spirit are blessed is because they inherit the kingdom. If others who are not poor in spirit also inherit the kingdom of heaven, then there is no real reason why the *poor in spirit* are blessed. The same can be said about all the other beatitudes.

Secondly, the beatitudes are related to each other, and often give rise (at least in part) to the other beatitudes. For example, being poor in spirit is fundamental to mourning for sin, being meek and being merciful.

What does it mean to be blessed?

Each of the beatitudes starts with the word “blessed”. It is useful to discuss this word in this introduction as it pertains to all the individual beatitudes.

The word “blessed” is one of those words that we more-or-less know the meaning of, but it is a bit more slippery when we need to define it precisely. The word can be described as:

- Truly happy
- Supremely joyful
- Wholeness
- Blissful

There is no single English word that can capture the meaning of “blessed”, and each of the above words by itself can

create a skewed meaning. For example, think of the second beatitude: “blessed are those who mourn.” If we had to say “happy are those who mourn” it would take a lot of explaining that “happy” cannot mean the usual feelings we associate with happiness, as the people are mournful.

I believe a phrase such as “divinely bestowed well-being” captures the meaning well. This phrase indicates that the blessedness is:

- Divinely bestowed: a well-being that is not based on feelings that are tied to earthly circumstances, but that is a spiritual quality that is supernatural as it comes from the Lord.
- Well-being: a state of wellness when our whole being is considered and all factors are taken into account. For example, many of the benefits of mourning ‘here and now’ will only be fully realised in the next life. So while we might experience mourning now, we are still blessed when all (spiritual) things are considered in the light of eternity.

A few more nuances could be mentioned, but “divinely bestowed well-being” is good enough for our purposes in this booklet.

Chapter Two: The poor in spirit

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:3)

Deep humility

Poor in spirit obviously does not refer to the balance in our bank accounts. The words “in spirit” reflect an internal quality of how we see ourselves before a holy God. The first beatitude then indicates that poverty of spirit means that we see ourselves as being spiritually “poor.” In other words, we see ourselves as spiritually and morally deficient and bankrupt before a holy, all-sufficient God. We see ourselves as being poor: having nothing to offer Him. This poverty of spirit can best be described then as a *deep humility* before God.

The opposite of this type of humility would include self-confidence, being self-assured and proud. The sins that would flow from this would include self-promotion, boasting, arrogant behaviour, self-reliance and selfish ambition.

To be poor in spirit is a gracious state that arises from the new birth. The Bible indicates that all men, as they are born into the world, are spiritually blind to their own sinful nature and blind to what God is like. They are proud, self-confident and self-reliant (Rom. 1:28-32). Most importantly, they are deluded about their true spiritual condition (Eph. 2:1-3).

Christian conversion includes:

- Repentance: a sorrow for personal sins, sorrow for our sinful condition that gives rise to our sins, and a turning away from sin toward God.
- Faith: being aware of our own lack of righteousness, and so trusting in the righteousness of Christ for salvation.

Both faith and repentance are therefore the expression and outflow of a person who is poor in spirit. Poverty of spirit is foundational to what it means to be a Christian, and the foundation of conversion.

As we will see in the subsequent beatitudes, poverty of spirit gives rise to mourning for sin and many of the other beatitudes. It explains why Christians hunger and thirst for righteousness (fourth beatitude); they acknowledge they have no righteousness of their own, but desperately need to be righteous before God.

A precious poverty

The Lord Jesus no doubt chose this spiritual poverty as the first beatitude because the Old Testament abundantly testified how precious such a spirit is to God:

- God is near to the contrite spirit (Ps. 34:18)
- The sacrifices of God are a contrite heart (Ps. 51:17)

- God dwells with the contrite and humble spirit (Isa. 57:15)

If you have ever wondered how you can attract God's attention, Isaiah 66:2 tells us that God looks on those who have a poor and contrite spirit.

The rich reward of the poor in spirit

The Lord Jesus describes the reward of the poor in spirit: they will receive the kingdom of heaven.

The word *kingdom* conveys the idea of grandeur, nobility and majesty. The poor in spirit are not going to receive a beggarly swamp, slum or dirty gutter.

The word *heaven* conveys the idea of a kingdom so far above the kingdoms of the world. It is a kingdom in which God is present and rules, a kingdom of exquisite grace, lavishness and pure joy.

To miss out on living in this kingdom is an ultimate, terrible loss. But the only way into this kingdom is by being poor in spirit.

God's dwelling

The kingdom of heaven is where God dwells. He is the source and centre of the joy, glory and bliss of this kingdom. In the

Old Testament, God has already told us whom He will dwell with. It is almost as if this first beatitude is a commentary and confirmation of Isaiah 57:15:

For this is what the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, says:

"I dwell in a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite."

The high and holy One will dwell with the humble and poor in spirit in His lavish, eternal kingdom. The Lord reigns in this kingdom to bless and do good to the poor in spirit. The first beatitude explains how God will eternally dwell with the poor in spirit: they will be present in His kingdom.

In summary

Poverty of spirit can best be described as a deep humility before God and man. The poor in spirit are blessed because they will dwell with God in His kingdom eternally. They will receive a rich reward for their spiritual poverty.

Chapter Three: The mourners

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
(Matt. 5:4)*

A surprising paradox

In the introductory chapter we highlighted the fact that the word *blessed* includes the idea of true happiness. This beatitude then expresses a paradox for the modern world especially: happy are the mourners! We will soon see how this is possible, and why this beatitude is so important for the church today.

Sorrow for what?

Does this beatitude teach that everyone who is mournful for any reason is blessed? This is clearly not for the case.

Firstly, we find in many places in Scripture that people under God's judgement can experience sorrow and mourn. For example, when God judged the Egyptians and killed all the firstborns, there was a great mourning in the land. These people were God's enemies, and certainly not blessed.

Secondly, we have already noted that the beatitudes are linked, and some beatitudes are foundational to those that

follow. It is not difficult to see that poverty of spirit (how we see ourselves before a holy God) would lead to a sorrow, specifically a sorrow for sin and for our spiritual condition.

This second beatitude can best be described as a heartfelt sorrow:

- For our personal sins and sinfulness
- The sinful condition of the world and how it dishonours God

The opposite condition to mourning for sin would include:

- Self-justification
- Blaming others for our failures and sin (a victim mentality)
- Being flippant or even boasting of our sin

The reward of the mourners

Those who mourn are blessed, for they (and they alone) will receive God's comfort.

The Bible indicates that this comfort will be experienced now in this life in part, and fully in eternity.

In this life

In this life, believers receive:

- The forgiveness of sins

- Peace with God
- A clear conscience
- Meaning and purpose in their life
- A sure hope of the life to come

These blessings are a great comfort, and replace the guilt and meaninglessness of their previous condition in sin.

In eternity

In the book of Revelation, God describes the full comfort that His children will receive:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among the people, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” (Rev. 21:3-4, emphases mine)

In heaven, mourning, pain, death and tears are finally and fully removed, and God’s children enjoy the bliss of heaven for all eternity. This is a final, undiminished and full comfort.

The need of the hour

A good question to ponder is what is the great need of the hour for the church? Many answers are given to this

question, judging by the bestsellers in the local Christian bookshops:

- More strategy
- More finances
- More spiritual gifts
- Signs and wonders
- Better programmes
- More collaboration

Many churches would not even think that mourning for sin can be a good thing. In fact, sin is hardly mentioned in the church, especially those that are seeker-sensitive. The result is a modern church filled with worldly, materialistic and superficial people who have never fully mourned for and repented of their sin.

Yet the Lord Jesus introduces us to the fundamental importance of poverty of spirit and mourning for sin as the very foundations of the Christian life.

Rather than producing joyless, depressed, gloomy Christians, mourning for sin produces joyful believers who are at peace with God and themselves. After all, blessed (*happy, joyful*) are those who mourn.

Chapter Four: The meek

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. (Matt. 5:5)

Outwit, outplay, outlast

A good issue to consider is how to be an overcomer, and what constitutes overcoming. The theory of evolution tells us that the fittest survive. This means that the strongest, fastest and most intelligent will overcome, and overcoming means to survive while other species go extinct.

Alexander the Great, the Caesars of Rome, Hitler and the like conceptualised overcoming as world domination through military conquest.

Others simply try and survive this life by doing the best that they can and use manipulation, shrewdness, bullying or deception to get there.

The CBS reality show, *Survivor*, was very popular. The aim of the contestants was to be the sole survivor. They had to outwit, outplay and outlast the others. Their strategies to do this included deceiving, cheating, manipulating and making or breaking alliances. Actually, to do whatever it took to overcome and be the sole survivor.

How does the Bible define overcoming, and what does Jesus say about being an overcomer? This third beatitude provides

an answer that is unexpected and contrary to the ideas in the world.

So what exactly is meekness?

The quality of meekness is greatly misunderstood. It can be best described as a lowliness of heart resulting in a spirit of submissiveness and willingness to yield.

The opposite of meekness would include aggression, self-assertion, arrogance, demanding or domineering behaviour.

Meekness towards God

It is crucial to understand that Christian meekness has both a God-ward and a man-ward focus, but the God-ward focus has priority.

Christian meekness, in the first instance, is a willingness to submit to God's will and word without grumbling. God's word is truth, and needs to be submitted to. God's will and providences in our lives are good and wise (despite sometimes being painful and contrary to what we want), and so we yield to them and don't complain.

However, as we yield and submit to God's word and will, it means that when the world wants us to compromise God's truth, we will resist the world. This will often come across as being harsh, strict and unyielding. In other words, the world will say we are not meek, but the opposite. However, this is not true.

A good example would be Martin Luther. Would we describe him as a meek Christian? Not according to the Roman Catholic Church. He was categorised as divisive, unyielding and unsubmissive to the church. Yet, Luther was standing for the truth of God's word and seeking to please Him. He *was* therefore meek in God's eyes, but not in man's eyes.

Similarly, when evangelicals stand for the truth on issues like the exclusivity of the gospel, the sin of abortion, or gender issues, they are seen as arrogant and unyielding. Yet from God's perspective these evangelicals (as long as their manner is gentle and respectful) would be meek, as they would be submissive and yielding to His will and word on these issues.

So meekness is definitely not spinelessness or cowardice. It takes courage and conviction to make unpopular stands for the Lord in the face of an antagonistic world.

Meekness toward men

Meekness towards men is therefore not just yielding and submitting to everything in the world. Meekness towards men is rather best seen when people are hurt or injured. Meekness consists of:

- Bearing injury
- Forgiving injury
- Repaying good for evil

Again, it is apparent that meekness is not weakness. It takes tremendous strength of character to accept injury and repay good for evil.

It is also important to note that meekness towards men can also include protecting others from abuse, as well as protecting ourselves from abuse.

Becoming meek

True meekness is not easily attained. We cannot just, through the sheer acting of our will, decide to be meek. So how do we become meek?

As mentioned previously, there is an order to the beatitudes. There is a reason that poverty of spirit and mourning for sin come first. They are foundational to becoming meek. Meekness is forged in the furnace of:

- A deep humility as we realise our spiritual bankruptcy and dependence on God.
- A mourning for sin as we realise how deeply sinful and polluted we are.

If we want to become meek, we need to start here.

Overcoming a fear

As one reflects on the vulnerability of being a meek person in a hard, harsh world, a fear arises: who will protect me and look out for my interests?

Questions arise:

- Won't others get the better of me?
- Won't I be exploited?
- Won't I be left behind while others get ahead?
- Won't I end up being downtrodden and miserable?

The Lord Jesus therefore articulates the reward of the meek in this beatitude.

The overcomers

The Lord Jesus promises that the meek will inherit the earth. The meek, and only the meek, will overcome and outlast all other people to inherit the earth.

Those who attempted to conquer the world with military might and force failed and will perish at the last judgment. Those who were domineering, bullies, exploiting others and manipulative in life to get their own way and climb above the rest will perish. All these will go away into eternal damnation.

Revelation 21:1, 5-8 is very instructive as it describes who will overcome and inherit the new heavens and the new earth.

¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea.

⁵ And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true." ⁶ Then He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give water to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life, without cost. ⁷ The one who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. ⁸ But for the cowardly, and unbelieving, and abominable, and murderers, and sexually immoral persons, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." (Rev. 21:5-8)

Firstly, God creates new heavens and a new earth (vs 1). The old earth will be destroyed with fire (2 Pet. 3:12).

Secondly, inheriting is equated with overcoming (vs 7). To be an overcomer is to survive the last judgement through the salvation that is in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, inheriting the new earth is inheriting all things, and eternally being a child of God and dwelling with Him (vs 7).

Fourthly, those who tried to be overcomers in other ways perished (vs 8).

Trusting the Lord

It takes faith and a deep trust in God to be meek in this life. It may mean that we do see others getting ahead of us in this

life. We won't always get our way. We will have to deny ourselves, and suffer the loss of many things in this world. However, it is a certain promise that the meek will overcome and inherit all things.

Chapter Five: Hungering for righteousness

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be satisfied. (Matt. 5:6)*

Food cravings

The most legendary (perhaps some husbands would use the word 'notorious') food cravings come from pregnant women. The cravings could extend to exotic or specialist foods, and usually are most acute late at night. The husband then has to dutifully get dressed, take the car, and try and source the food in question. Anything from prawns to chips, steak to eggs.

Before we got married, my wife did not eat much red meat at all. However, when she fell pregnant with our first child, she craved red meat – especially steak. Word of the craving got around, and very soon the church people had named our first child, Vleis Aucamp (if it was a boy). For those not familiar with Afrikaans, "vleis" means meat. South Africa had a famous rugby player named "Vleis Visagie." Fortunately our first child turned out to be a girl (a petite blond) and the name got dropped.

This fourth beatitude describes a spiritual craving that every single Christian must have. Of all the beatitudes, it gives the most specific and precise test of what a true Christian is.

Profiling a true Christian

Believers are described as those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. We are all familiar with the sensation of hunger and thirst. It speaks of a basic, deep need or desire that can get acute and desperate. When hunger or thirst set in, they tend to dominate our feelings and thoughts until they are satisfied. In other words, believers have a spiritual craving that is similar to the condition of hungering for physical food.

Believers are said to hunger and thirst for righteousness. It is important to note that this beatitude does not say that they hunger and thirst for joy, happiness, fulfilment or meaning (although they may also do so). Rather, they have a dominant or overriding need for righteousness.

Righteousness can be described both positively and negatively. Positively, it means to be morally right and blameless in God's sight. Negatively, it means to have our sin and guilt removed before a holy God.

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness flows from the previous beatitudes. The Holy Spirit does a work in a person, giving them a new heart. This new heart gives a new perspective to a person:

- They become poor in spirit, as they now see their true condition of being spiritually bankrupt before a holy, all-sufficient God, and therefore have a deep humility. They have nothing to offer God.

- They mourn their sinful condition, acknowledging they have no righteousness.
- They then crave to be righteous before God. It is their one dominant and desperate need.

The craving satisfied

This beatitude promises that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied. The picture is that of being filled to a state of complete satisfaction and contentment.

How does this happen? The Bible teaches that the mission of the Lord Jesus and the reason why He had to die on the cross was to make people righteous before God. God is holy, and sin and uncleanness is a barrier to a relationship with God. The Lord Jesus therefore takes the punishment and guilt of His people upon Himself, and gives them His righteousness (Isa. 53; Rom. 3:21-15; 2 Cor. 5:21).

More specifically, the Lord Jesus accomplished three main aspects of redemption which satisfy the need for righteousness before God.

Firstly, believers are *justified* in God's sight: this means they are declared to be completely righteous, and presented as blameless (Rom. 3:21-26).

Secondly, believers are *sanctified*: this means that the power of sin is practically broken in their lives, and they can now, through the Holy Spirit, live godly lives (although not perfect in this life) (Rom. 6:6, 14; Rom. 8:13; 1 Cor. 1:30).

Thirdly, when believers are glorified in heaven, all their remaining sin will be removed, and they will be made perfectly holy, to sin no more (Rom. 8:30; Heb. 12:23; 1 Cor. 15:42-44).

It is important to note that the path to blessedness for the believer is through righteousness. Believers are blessed because they hunger and thirst for righteousness, and are filled by Christ's work on the cross. There is no blessedness without righteousness.

The profile of a non-Christian

Everyone hungers and thirsts for something. Who doesn't want happiness, joy, peace, meaning and fulfilment to be part of their lives? However, for the non-Christian, righteousness is not a major concern. The proof of this is that very often, if a person believes that something will bring about happiness (such as money, sex or fame) it does not always matter how these are obtained. To the world, for example, sex outside of marriage is a completely natural and acceptable way to achieve happiness or blessedness. Righteousness, as defined by God, is not a significant concern in their pursuit.

How to treat a disease

A good illustration of the two approaches to achieve blessedness is the treatment of a disease.

The first option is to only do pain management through the use of pain killers. This will bring temporary relief, but never result in good health and wholeness.

The second option is to diagnose the illness and take the correct medicine to cure the disease. This will not only relieve the pain, but also result in health and wholeness.

With regard to this fourth beatitude, righteousness is the medicine that will bring lasting blessedness. Our spiritual disease is sin and uncleanness before God. To seek happiness without righteousness is the equivalent of merely trying to manage the pain. It is not a lasting cure, and never brings wholeness and health.

Non-Christians seeking a happy, fulfilling life without seeking righteousness will end up being destroyed in eternal damnation. Looking for temporary relief from the pain of life in money, sex, power or fame will find that it does not bring a lasting cure. Being righteous in God's sight and having our sin and guilt dealt with through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus will find result in healing and peace.

Final thoughts

Only two points need to be emphasised.

Firstly, many people try Christianity for a while to see if it will 'work' for them and bring them happiness. They are not too concerned about their sin and being righteous before God, as they are not hungering and thirsting after it. They are rather

seeking happiness and fulfilment via the easiest or quickest path that will get them there. Even if that path involves sin, they are more interested in the perceived end destination of some form of happiness. Such a person is not a true Christian, and will soon leave Christianity and the church. A work of true grace in someone's life will result in conviction of sin, a deep humility and a hunger and thirst after righteousness. Only these people will be filled and find eternal joy in the salvation that comes through Christ.

Secondly, the mark of a true Christian must be holy living and obedience. Of course this will not be perfect, and all believers do sin. But it is simply not possible that someone who truly hungers and thirsts after righteousness will live an ungodly, sinful life like the rest of the world. True conversion will be demonstrated by holy fruit and righteous living.

Chapter Six: Being merciful

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. (Matt. 5:7)

The life of Pastor Hsi

Before his conversion, Pastor Hsi was a Confucian scholar living in China in the 1800s. He was opposed to Christianity and the Christian missionaries in the land. He was also an opium addict.

Opium addiction was a serious problem in China at that time. It is estimated that up to 30% of the population was addicted. Opium production and trade was mainly driven by the British for economic reasons, which also led to the two Opium Wars.

Hsi was introduced to Jesus Christ by a Wesleyan missionary, David Hill (1840-1896). Hsi was converted by God's grace despite his antagonism to the gospel. He soon realised his opium addiction was a problem and incompatible with the life of a believer. He had an intense battle with the addiction, but was miraculously delivered from it.

He started a refuge at Fantsun for opium addicts. During this time, Pastor Hsi demonstrated the two critical ingredients of Christian mercy.

The first ingredient is a *compassion* for those in their misery. He had been through the harsh withdrawal symptoms of the addiction, and could pity those in similar circumstances.

Secondly, he took *action*. He used much of his own finances to run the refuge, and also developed some medicine to help the addicts. He then ministered to the addicts, often spending long hours in the night comforting them in their agony, and fasting regularly for those going through particularly bad withdrawals.

Christian mercy always involves the key ingredients of compassion and action to help those in their misery.

What does it mean to be merciful?

Mercy can be described as Christian compassion and action for those in misery.

Compassion for someone without acting to help them is not being merciful. It is merely feeling sorrow for them. If God looked down on mankind in the misery of their sin and felt sorry for them, but did not send His Son to save them, then these people would not receive mercy. They would, after all, still die in their sin. In the same way, if we feel sorrow for people in misery but do not act to help them, we have not been merciful, and the people in their distress did not receive mercy from us.

Mercy is most clearly seen when someone who hurt us is now under our power and in need. To have compassion on

such a person and to act to help them in their need is mercy at its brightest. Joseph is a person who comes to mind who displayed such mercy. His brothers were jealous of him and sold him into slavery. He endured much hardship and unjust treatment. Finally God lifted him to great prominence and power in Egypt. Then his brothers came to buy food during the famine. Joseph showed remarkable grace and mercy to his brothers. He had compassion on them, and then acted to alleviate their misery.

The Lord Jesus shows us what perfect mercy looks like. Moved with compassion for those who rebelled and sinned against Him, He came down from heaven to save them from their sins. Even when they crucified Him, He prayed that the Father would not hold it against them (Lk. 23:34).

Mercy is therefore very costly. It needs to overcome the hurt that is inflicted, then it needs to even feel compassion for the one who inflicted the hurt, and lastly it needs to move in action to help the one who is in need.

Mercy is love in action for those who are underserving.

Why is mercy so important?

Mercy is crucial in the life of the believer for the following three reasons.

Firstly, if we want to show God's character to the world, we need to be merciful. The Bible repeatedly emphasises the mercy of God:

The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy. The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works. (Ps. 145:8-9)

God truly delights in mercy (Mal. 7:18).

Secondly, mercy is one of the weightier matters of life. In Matthew 9:10-13, the Lord Jesus said that God desired mercy and not sacrifice. This means that mercy was a weightier matter of the law, even more important than the ceremonial aspects of offering sacrifices.

Thirdly, mercy is a test of true faith and love. James 2:14-18 warns of the emptiness of wishing others well, but not doing anything to help them in their plight. Such “compassion” is not true love, and does not arise from true faith. True faith is shown in works, not in mere words.

Must we always show mercy?

It is important to understand the need for wisdom when exercising mercy, so that sin does not flourish and triumph. A few examples will clarify this point:

- Children need to be disciplined for disobedience. Parents cannot just excuse their sin all the time, else they will grow up to be reprobates (Prov. 13:24). For this reason, the God of mercy disciplines His children, so that they will be righteous (Heb. 12:5-11).

- Judges and magistrates need to punish criminals, else wickedness will flourish. They cannot just release criminals in the name of mercy.
- Churches must still exercise church discipline against offending professing believers (Matt. 18: 15-17).
- Those who are lazy should not eat (2 Thess. 3:10). They should not be excused and fed in the name of mercy.

God always exercises His mercy so that sin will not flourish and proliferate, but rather be curbed.

How to cultivate mercy

As indicated above, mercy is costly. How is it possible to be moved with compassion for those who have hurt us, let alone act and use our money or resources to help them? Only a supernatural work of grace can make us merciful.

At the outset we mentioned that the beatitudes are not randomly ordered, but they build upon each other. Mercy only flows from a new heart. This new heart gives a new perspective to a person:

- They become poor in spirit, as they now see their true condition of being spiritually bankrupt before a holy, all-sufficient God, and therefore have a deep humility. They have nothing to offer God. He has shown them mercy.

- They mourn their sinful condition, acknowledging they have no righteousness. Rather, they have received mercy from the Lord.
- They then crave to be righteous before God, which includes living a godly life. Part of living a godly life is showing mercy towards others.

All this means that believers can show mercy only as they realise their own unworthiness, and how much mercy has been showered on them. They can then show mercy to others, by God's grace.

Look to the reward

In order to encourage mercifulness in His children, the Lord provides a promise in this beatitude, namely that those who exercise mercy will receive mercy.

This must not be seen in the sense of believers meriting mercy from God by being merciful. This is impossible. Receiving mercy, by definition, means it is unmerited. Mercy is to receive good and kindness from the Lord while in our sinful misery. We exercise mercy to others because we have received mercy.

Thus, this promise reminds us of two important truths. Firstly, the character of true believers (who have received mercy) is that they are merciful. Mercifulness in the life of a believer is evidence that they are in a state of grace and have been born again.

Secondly, there is a future aspect to obtaining mercy. While believers have received mercy from God and have their sins washed away in Christ, there is still a final day of judgement coming. On this day, only those who demonstrate true salvation by the fruit of mercy towards others will be saved. A mere profession will not suffice.

These two points are clearly demonstrated in Matthew 25:31-36:

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. ³³ And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’

Notice that this refers to the final day of judgement, where the righteous will enter into eternal glory, and the wicked will be cast into eternal hell.

Notice also that the evidence the Lord looks for to show true conversion are works of mercy. His children gave food, gave drink, clothed others and visited the sick.

Chapter Seven: The pure in heart

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. (Matt. 5:8)

Facing an impossible test

In 2006 I started doing a degree in theology via distance learning. It took me six years in total to do 39 subjects. I left Greek and Hebrew for last. I did this for one main reason: I am challenged when it comes to languages, and I was not sure I was going to pass these subjects. I did not want to start my degree with intense hardship and discouragement, so I left them until last.

To say that I found Greek hard is an understatement. The grammatical forms, tenses and cases just piled up. As I came to terms with one chapter, the next even longer and more difficult chapter came along. The amount of memorisation I needed to do seemed to get exponentially longer until I got three quarters of the way through the textbook and felt my head was going to explode. I told myself there was no way I could remember and understand all this, and there was simply no way I was going to pass this test. It was too difficult, onerous and overwhelming. A friend who had done this course a few years before described her experience of Greek as “oppressive”. That is a good description.

What does learning Greek have to do with this beatitude?

As we approach the subject of being pure in heart, we naturally shrink away from it. It is frightening. It seems that a standard of being pure in heart as a description of a believer is too high and difficult to attain. It is a test that is too hard to pass! If we are in touch with ourselves and our remaining corruption, we would never describe ourselves as being pure in heart. We certainly don't see how God, being as holy and perfectly honest as He is, could describe us as being pure in heart.

This beatitude can therefore be confusing and frightening to a believer. What does it mean? How can I possibly be pure in heart?

It is best to therefore work through this beatitude step by step, and take each one at a time so we don't get overwhelmed by the prospect of this test.

What do the words mean?

The word "heart" in Scripture refers to the inner man: our thoughts, emotions and will as opposed to our outward, bodily appearance. One could say it is the real you – what you are really like inside.

The word "pure" can have a variety of meanings, which include holy, untainted, single-minded or undivided. These are obviously closely related. In English, we usually associate "being pure" with being "completely untainted by contamination".

I believe the primary meaning in the beatitude is that of being single or undivided as opposed to duplicitous, divided and hypocritical.

So a useful paraphrase of the term *pure in heart* is a person who is “single” or “undivided” and as a result lives a life that is holy and righteous, although not perfectly so.

This contrast between purity and double-mindedness is established in James 4:8:

*Come close to God and He will come close to you.
Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your
hearts, you double-minded.*

The double-minded are called to purify their hearts. This means that the opposite of being double-minded (or hypocritical) is being single-minded (or authentic; genuine). This is equivalent to being pure in heart, according to this verse.

In summary, to be *pure in heart* means to be someone who has a single, undivided, unhypocritical heart that leads to a life of real holiness, although not perfectly so.

Does this beatitude refer to our legal standing before God?

There are some theologians and Christian commentators who would answer this question affirmatively, and reason as follows:

To be pure in heart means to be perfectly holy and righteous. This is practically impossible for believers this side of glory. The only conclusion is that being “pure in heart” refers to our legal standing before God – similar to justification. In other words, God considers us as pure in heart or blameless because of what Christ did for us on the cross. It is our legal standing before God, not our actual, practical condition.

In my view, this position is problematic for two reasons.

First and foremost, all the other beatitudes refer to our actual character. For example, as we have seen:

- The poor in spirit are those who are aware of their deeply sinful condition and spiritual poverty, which results in a deep humility. It cannot refer to their legal standing before God (which would be perfection in Christ), but to their actual character of deep humility.
- To mourn sin cannot refer to our legal standing before God, as our legal standing before God is blamelessness in Christ. Mourning for sin refers to a person that is deeply sorrowful for sin.
- To hunger and thirst for righteousness also cannot refer to our legal standing before God, as our legal standing is being perfectly righteous in Christ. It refers to a person who desires to be holy.

So all the beatitudes refer to Christian character. They refer to what a Christian actually is in their character, attitudes and

behaviour. It would be extremely unlikely that all the other beatitudes refer to the actual character of believers, but this beatitude refers to our legal standing before God.

Secondly, a number of verses in the Bible clearly indicate that purity of heart is the character of the redeemed. For example, Psalm 24:3-4 says:

³ Who may ascend onto the hill of the Lord? And who may stand in His holy place? ⁴ One who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to deceit and has not sworn deceitfully.

Or consider 2 Timothy 2:22:

Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

Both these passages are speaking about the actual character and conduct of a believer. These verses speak of putting away deceitfulness, uncleanness and youthful lusts (something we must do) and being pure in heart in a practical way.

In chapter one we saw that the Lord Jesus was, through these beatitudes, correcting the distortion and confusion the Pharisees had introduced through their legalism, religious showmanship and hypocrisy. The average Jew had a distorted view of what true godliness looked like because of the poor example of the Pharisees. The Lord denounced them as hypocrites (which means to have divided hearts) who cleanse the outside of the cup but on the inside they are

full of uncleanness (Matt. 23:25). They needed to have pure hearts.

How do we become pure in heart?

This is a crucial question. There are three points that need to be made in order to answer this question.

- 1) All people are born with corrupt hearts

The Bible portrays mankind in unflattering terms. No one is born innocent or morally neutral. On the contrary:

The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? (Jer. 17:9)

And:

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of mankind was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. (Gen. 6:5)

These verses do not speak about a few, particularly wicked people:

“There is no righteous person, not even one; there is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks out God; they have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, there is not even one.” (Rom. 3:10-12)

2) People are given new hearts by God when they become believers

Because true religion is a matter of the heart, we desperately need new hearts. We cannot change our own hearts (Jer. 13:23). God needs to intervene and start the process of saving someone by giving them a new heart:

Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and bring it about that you walk in My statutes, and are careful and follow My ordinances. (Ezek. 36:26-27)

We learned before that our hearts refer to our inner man: who we truly are. This means that when we receive new hearts, we become new creatures. This is the process of the new birth (Jn. 3:1-3; 1 Pet. 1:22-23).

3) New creations

This change of heart is so radical that the Bible calls believers “new creations”:

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, this person is a new creation; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. (2 Cor. 5:17)

The Bible therefore teaches that Christianity is not a matter of turning over a new leaf or trying to reform ourselves. Nor is Christianity a matter of conforming to some external

rituals. Nothing less than a new birth is required, where our old, corrupt hearts are removed and we are given new hearts by God. This transformation is so radical and life changing that we are described as new creations.

This new heart results in a new life of genuine (although imperfect) holiness:

...that, in reference to your former way of life, you are to rid yourselves of the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you are to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. (Eph. 4:22-24)

The reward of the pure in heart

The joy of sightseeing

I don't know anyone who does not enjoy sightseeing. We hike up steep, exhausting terrain to see magnificent views. We travel to other countries to see spectacular and rare scenes. Sights can inspire us, move us and overwhelm us. They take our breath away.

The ultimate sight

This beatitude promises that the reward of the pure in heart is that they will see the ultimate sight, namely God.

Perhaps you have not considered what a staggering promise this is. To see God is the most incredible privilege that can be given to a creature. It is not given to everyone – only to the pure in heart.

To see God is extremely rare, and a full sight of God's pure Being is impossible:

Then Moses said, "Please, show me Your glory!" And He said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion to whom I will show compassion." He further said, "You cannot see My face, for mankind shall not see Me and live!" Then the Lord said, "Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen." (Exod. 33:18-23)

This passage has much that is mysterious to us. We are not quite sure what Moses saw. But we do know that he was privileged to see what he did see. We also know he did not

see all of God. But what he did see had a profound effect on him.

I believe the Bible's teaching on the subject of seeing God can be summarised as follows:

- No one can ever see the pure Being of God (1 Tim. 6:15-17; Jn. 6:46). He is invisible and dwells in unapproachable light. John Piper says: "Only the Son can see the Father with non-physical, unmediated, direct seeing. We cannot see God spiritually the way the Son of God in unmediated directness can see him."
- In the OT, people saw glimpses of God's glory (Exod. 19:16-20). Moses saw the most of God (Exod. 33:18-23).
- Jesus Christ is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His Being (Heb. 1:2-3).
- On earth, the glory of Christ was veiled. He appeared as a normal man. On one occasion, three of the disciples saw some of the veil removed at the transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-3).
- Believers now behold God by faith (Heb. 11:27).
- In heaven, as much of God's Being and glory that can be seen, will be seen in the face of Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:12-17; 1 Jn. 3:2).

John MacArthur says:

"In heaven, since we will be free from sin, we will see God's glory unveiled in its fullness. That will be a more pleasing, spectacular sight than anything we

have known or could ever imagine on earth. No mere earthly pleasure can even begin to measure up to the privilege and the ecstasy of an unhindered view of the divine glory. We ought to be eagerly looking for that day when our vision will be enlightened by the glory of His presence. I sincerely hope that's your deepest desire."

The misery of the wicked

This beatitude indicates that *only* the pure in heart will see God. The rest of mankind, who have not been born again, will not see God. They will be cast away from His glorious presence, and dwell in eternal darkness (Matt. 25:30). The slightest glimpse of Christ's glory will terrify them so much that they will rather plead to be crushed than to see Him:

And I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became as black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the eminent people, and the commanders and the wealthy and the strong, and every slave and free person hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they said to the

mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the sight of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of Their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" (Rev. 6:12-17)

Make sure you are not one of these people!

Chapter Eight: Being peacemakers

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.” (Matt. 5:9)

The world at war!

You don't have to be a genius to see that war has ravaged our planet since fallen man has been on it. War between nations, tribes and individuals. Wars rage between family members, and one family wars with another family. We have had two world wars, countless civil wars, and many, many wars between nations. How have we tried to remedy this situation?

The main objectives of the United Nations are the maintenance of international peace and security, the promotion of the well-being of the peoples of the world, and international cooperation to these ends.

Has it been effective? Someone said:

“The United Nations has failed to prevent war and fulfil peacekeeping duties many times throughout its history. Millions of people around the world have been killed and displaced since the UN was founded in 1945.”

Some of the wars and conflicts that the United Nations has failed to prevent include:

- Kashmir dispute
- Cambodia violence
- Somali civil war
- Rwandan civil war
- Darfur conflict in Sudan
- Ukraine – Russia conflict that is ongoing

There have been many more wars.

What has been the cause of these failures? An article has proposed the following:

“Many of the failures of the United Nations came because of the lack of communication between its member states. Communication has been a problem and still is today; if the UN does not fix this problem in the organization, the organization will continue to be a waste of money and time for those involved in it.”

Is lack of communication one of the key issues? What does the Bible say? The Bible gives us a true and fundamental perspective of the root cause of the conflict on the globe:

Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. (Jam. 4:1-2)

The real problem is in the heart of man, something which the United Nations cannot remedy:

For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. (Matt. 15:19)

The God of peace

Christians ought to resemble God in their character. This beatitude is remarkable in that it singles out being a peacemaker as most resembling God. Peacemakers will be *called* sons of God. In other words, believer most resemble God when they seek to make peace and be at peace with others.

When peace surrounds and follows us as believers, it will be said of us: there goes a child of God!

When discord, fighting, conflict, division and animosity surround and follow a person, it will be said of him or her: there goes a child of the devil!

God is, after all, a God of peace (2 Cor. 13:11). The phrase "God of peace" occurs six times in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus is called the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6). When He was born into the world, the angels proclaimed peace and goodwill towards men (Lk. 2:10-14).

The mission of Christ was to bring peace on a planet filled with war and conflict. He came to introduce:

- Peace and reconciliation with God
- Peace and joy in believers themselves

- Peace between believers

John Brown said this of believers:

“...and being at peace with God, and at peace with themselves, they (Christians) are at peace with the whole world, regarding all mankind with a sincere benevolence, and desirous of promoting their best interests, both in this world and the world to come.”

Thomas Watson, conversely, said:

“Be suspicious of a religion full of faction and discord.”

Becoming a peacemaker

There are at least three key steps to being a peacemaker. Each step addresses a key area where the opposite of peace-making, namely strife, comes from.

Step 1: Peacemakers starts with a heart attitude

We have already seen that James points us to the origin of wars and conflict: our evil desires (Jam. 4:1-2). The Lord Jesus said exactly the same thing:

But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and those things defile the person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, acts of adultery, other immoral sexual acts, thefts, false

testimonies, and slanderous statements. (Matt. 15:18-19)

Our hearts have all the seeds of discord, strife and war in them. Some of these seeds are described in Ephesians 4:30-32:

- Bitterness
- Wrath
- Anger
- Clamour
- Evil speaking

With these desires raging in our hearts, it is no wonder that fighting and strife will follow us.

As described in previous chapters, we need new hearts that have godly desires and motives. We need a Christian character, and purity of heart.

The previous beatitudes describe this character. For example, those who are poor in spirit (deeply humble) and meek (having a desire to be submissive to others) will promote peace. Being merciful towards others, even our enemies, will turn away hostility and strife.

Godly wisdom is peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits (Jam. 3:17). These are the qualities of a peacemaker.

Step 2: Peacemakers act in ways that promote peace

It is critical to evaluate how we behave. In particular, the above Scriptures often point to the sins of the tongue as one of the key causes of strife. Our words can either sow discord and strife or promote peace.

In particular:

- Be quick to listen, slow to speak.
- Be careful what you repeat. Gossip and slander are particularly destructive.
- Be careful how you say things: use a gentle tone and speak with kindness.
- Be careful how you speak of others.

When others criticise us, there is potential for strife. We should always strive to be approachable, humble, gentle and loving.

Step 3: Peacemakers are cautious about confronting and challenging

There are certainly times to contend for the truth (Jude 1:3) and confront sin and compromise (Matt. 18:15-17). This beatitude is not encouraging believers to just be “easy going”, to stand for nothing and have peace at any price. After all, our Prince of Peace also came to bring a sword (Matt. 10:34).

When standing for the truth and confronting sin in the church, our aim must always be to bring out the unity of the faith and righteousness that results in true, everlasting peace (Eph. 4:13).

It is to be feared that much of the “contending” in the church has more to do with our pride, our preferences and selfishness than for pure, godly motives.

This means that when we do contend for the truth and confront sin, we need to be cautious, humble and examine ourselves. We should always contend for truth from a position of humility and meekness, never from pride, arrogance or anger.

A good verse to memorise and have uppermost in our minds as we seek to live in this world and in the church:

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, free of hypocrisy. (Jam. 3:17)

Chapter Nine: Being joyful in persecution

“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in this same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

(Matt. 5:10-12)

Woe is me!

Our most basic and natural response to being falsely accused is self-pity. We know that what is happening to us is unjust and unfair. We are gripped by indignation, and then self-pity seeps in every part of our being.

I can still remember an incident in great detail from over 40 years ago (when I was small) when I was falsely accused, and how self-pity flooded my soul.

In this beatitude, the Lord Jesus teaches us a different response when unfairly treated. There are eight main points to be learned from this beatitude with regard to persecution.

Point one: A critical qualification

Not all persecution and unjust treatment is blessed. Perhaps the most critical point of this whole beatitude is to understand that the Lord carefully qualifies the type of persecution that is blessed.

The persecution that is blessed is that which is:

- (i) For righteousness' sake: being persecuted for doing good and abiding by God's holy law.
- (ii) False: it was not deserved by bad behaviour or bad attitudes which normally get people into trouble and attract opposition.
- (iii) For Christ's sake: it is persecution that arises from a life that is committed to Christ and His kingdom, not just any cause.

Many people, even in the church, experience conflict and opposition from being rude, unwise, argumentative, having bad attitudes or from being sinful and disobedient. The difficulty and conflict that arise from such behaviour are not synonymous with being persecuted for righteousness' sake, but arise from the consequences of our sin.

How can we know if we are being persecuted for righteousness' sake, or for our sin? The preceding beatitudes help in this regard. They describe godly Christian character that is blessed. So, for example, the beatitudes commend a character of deep humility (poor in spirit), meekness (seeking to be submissive), a hungering for righteousness and being a peacemaker as opposed to a trouble causer. If we have, by

God's grace, a character and behaviour that is in line with the beatitudes, then we can be sure that any persecution that comes our way is unjust and for Christ's sake.

Point two: There are various types of persecution

Persecution can take many forms. In the text, the Lord mentions general persecution, but also *insults* and *evil speaking*. As we read the Bible and observe believers in this world, persecution can include the following:

- False accusation and slander
- Gossip
- Physical harm and even death
- Confiscation of property
- Isolation and abandonment by friends and family
- Imprisonment

All believers can expect to experience at least some of these types of persecution in their lives to a greater or lesser degree.

Point three: Perpetrators of persecution

In the text, the Lord mentions "people" and "they" who will persecute believers. In the context of the gospels and the book of Acts, we find that "they" can include:

- Religious leaders who profess to follow God (Pharisees and Sadducees)

- Gentiles (Romans and others)
- The government of the day (Roman and Jewish)
- Family (Jesus's family did not believe in Him)
- Deceitful friends (e.g. Judas betrayed Jesus)

The Book of Revelation points to Satan, the one behind much, if not all, the persecution of believers:

So the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. (Rev. 12:17)

Point four: A very difficult beatitude

The Lord Jesus emphasises the blessedness of the person who is persecuted for His sake. It is repeated in verses ten and eleven. However, the Lord then says something that makes this beatitude perhaps one of the most difficult to come to terms with: *rejoice and be glad* when you are persecuted. Other versions say something like *rejoice and be exceedingly glad*.

We have already noted that persecution can include torture, imprisonment, loss of possessions and homes, alienation from families and even death. When these things happen to believers for Christ's sake, they ought to rejoice and be exceedingly glad.

Is this standard unobtainable and unrealistic?

It is not, by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit. We have numerous instances where the early disciples suffered greatly for Christ's sake, and rejoiced in it. Some passages include:

They followed his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them. So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. (Acts 5:40-41; emphasis mine)

But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public spectacle through insults and distress, and partly by becoming companions with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better and lasting possession. (Heb. 10:32-34; emphasis mine)

Point five: A difficult beatitude for you and me

You will notice that in verse ten the Lord speaks generally: blessed are *those* who are persecuted. In verse eleven,

however, He repeats the beatitude, but speaks directly to disciples: blessed are *you* when *you* are persecuted.

The Lord was surely preparing the Apostles and indeed every disciple that persecution will come their way. They will not be exempt. The type and degree of persecution may vary, but it will come.

How can we be prepared for persecution when it comes our way? What can we do to ensure that we respond to this persecution with gladness and rejoicing, as opposed to self-pity or grumbling?

The beatitude gives us help with the last three points below.

Point six: Keep your eyes on the Lord of Glory

The Lord Jesus speaks of the blessed as being persecuted for *His sake* (vs 11). We are suffering for our Lord, who suffered greatly for us and laid down His life for our peace.

As we noted earlier, the disciples rejoiced for being counted worthy to suffer for His name (Acts 5:40-41).

Point seven: Look to the reward

The reason we are to rejoice when persecuted is that we have a great reward waiting for us in heaven (vs 12). We are, after all, inheriting the kingdom of heaven (vs 10). The Lord will never be in our debt. When He calls us to suffer for His name, He gives us such a great reward that it far outweighs our light affliction (2 Cor. 4:17).

Point eight: Remember those who have gone before us

The prophets in the Old Testament endured suffering for their Lord as they faithfully proclaimed His message (vs 12).

The book of Hebrews recounts the sufferings of the prophets and those who have gone before:

Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mocking and flogging, and further, chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented (people of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts, on mountains, and sheltering in caves and holes in the ground. (Heb. 11:35-38)

Every generation of believers has experienced persecution, from Abel to the present. Let us also leave a legacy of suffering joyfully for the sake of our Lord.