

I. Introduction

A. Over the last four to five thousand years, hundreds of millions of speeches have been given by all kinds of people in all kinds of settings. Politicians have campaigned, military commanders have rallied troops, teachers have instructed, professors have lectured, pastors have preached, comedians have entertained, lawyers have argued. Words have flowed! Today we begin looking at what is arguably the most famous speech ever given. It's certainly the most famous sermon. It was delivered by Jesus shortly after selecting his twelve apostles and is so powerful, memorable and remarkable that it stands alongside the Ten Commandments, Psalm 23 and The Lord's Prayer as the most famous parts of the Bible. As John Stott said about the various aspects of this sermon, "Their wealth is inexhaustible. We cannot plumb their depths. Truly, 'We are near heaven here.'"¹

B. The speech was given shortly after Christ selected the 12. Luke 6:17, which sets this up, reads:

1. He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

C. At that point he began to instruct them. Who knows what the people thought they were going to hear. What they got was a shocking, radically disorienting and impossibly challenging call to new way of living. It takes your breath away.

II. Before we jump in, there are few things to point out:

A. First, the sermon we are going to look at has a couple names. In Matthew's Gospel it's called The Sermon on the Mount because it's given while the people are seated on a big hill. In Luke's Gospel it's called The Sermon on the Plane because – as we see in verse 17 – that's where it was delivered. Verse 17 opens, "He went down with them and stood on a level place." Some hold that it's the same speech – that the people were sitting on a hillside but Christ was standing on a level section and that under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Matthew highlighted some things and Luke others. I think this was a talk that Jesus gave more than once. In fact, I suspect it was sort his key note address and that He gave it many times as he traveled from town to town.² Matthew summarizes one – and that is all we have is a summary.³ Jesus almost certainly spoke longer than the eight minutes it takes to read what Matthew wrote and certainly longer than the two minutes it takes to read what Luke records. Both distilled Christ's comments to a brief synopsis – the core of his teaching.

B. Second: the sermon has several parts. The section we are looking at today is called The Beatitudes. A beatitude is a proverb-like proclamations that begins, "blessed are the..."

1. In Latin is the phrase "blessed are" is the adjective *beātitūdō*, which leads to the English word "beatitude." It means "happy", "fortunate", or "blissful". The meaning is descriptive.⁴ It's not saying, "If you are poor you will be blessed." It is describing a quality of your life now.

2. There are four Beatitudes in Luke, eight in Matthew. Each one consists of two parts, the condition (blessed are the poor, blessed are those who hunger) and the result (for theirs is the Kingdom of God, or for they will be satisfied).

C. Third: There are a couple takeaways. We're not only get a distillation of Christ's teaching and a glorious call to step up – to live in light of ultimate reality – we get another reminder of what is expected of us and of the fact that we do not measure up.

1. One of the purposes of The Law, the code of ethics that God gave the Jews through Moses back at Mount Sinai – the moral, civil and ceremonial instruction that God handed to the Jews to help them move from being slaves to being a nation – was to make it clear that we fall short. We need help. We are not going to be able to be good enough under our own strength. The Law offers an objective standard that makes it clear how high we have to jump so we will understand that we can't jump that high.

2. Lacking an objective measure we tend to compare ourselves to others. It's a fatally flawed exercise. We are selective about who we compare ourselves to and we tend to contrast our intentions with other people's actions. Some end up feeling worse about themselves – like me comparing myself to Finny Kurkuvilla. Others feel better than they should. In The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus provides an answer key so it's clearer how we are doing. When he says:

- a) You have been told not to murder, but I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.
- b) You have heard, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

3. There is no doubt that part of what Jesus is doing in this sermon is making it clear that we cannot be good enough to earn what we long for. But, we cannot dismiss the ideal he describes as a utopian fantasy. What Jesus is teaching is what we are called to. What Jesus sets before us is the way we are supposed to live and it is the way the world will ultimately work. Jesus is not only making it clear that we fall short, he is answering two of the most important questions of all times: What the good life looks like and what a good person looks like. We need to see that He is doing both.

D. Finally, before we jump into the text, I want to remind you about the timing of this passage. Jesus has just selected the twelve. He spent the night in prayer, came down and chose his apostles. There are others listening in and what he says applies to them (and us!) as well.⁵ But this is part of the apostle's orientation. This is the first day of class. And as I mentioned last week, Christ cannot build on their starting assumptions about life, so he is doing some major foundational repair work right away. There is a sense in which Jesus is saying, "in order to understand what's about to happen you have to embrace these ideas. I am giving you first principles here. You need a new foundation. If you do not get this down, little of what follows will make any sense."

III. Enough said, let me read just a bit of the most famous sermon ever. Luke 6:17:

A. Jesus went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all. Looking at his disciples, he said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

IV. The First Beatitude:

A. I often say, “We could camp here for weeks because it’s so rich.” That is certainly true here because this section is loaded with implications, but it’s also true here because the interpretation of these statements is so hotly debated. There are at least four takes on the first Beatitude: Blessed are the poor.

B. There are some who say, this means the poor are God’s favorites. This is a view that fueled the Liberation Theology movement that grew in Latin America back in the 70s and 80s. It was a toxic blend of liberal Christianity and Marxism. It’s not without some support.

1. Jesus clearly cares about the poor. He always moves towards the least and the lost.

2. And spiritually speaking the New Testament is quite clear, it’s easier to be poor than rich. Money is not evil. It’s the love of money that gets us into all kinds of trouble. But money leads to arrogance and spiritual apathy and few can handle it.⁶

3. That said, I think Liberation Theology is wrong. The idea that God values the poor above others is not what is being taught here. For starters, the poor are not universally noble. Some are poor because they are giving everything away, but some are poor because they are lazy. And being poor is not the goal.⁷ Jesus is not poor now. He humbled himself and lived simply, but he has been exalted.

C. The second interpretation of this passage is that Jesus was addressing those who'd just left their livelihood to follow him. They'd set aside their nets. The idea here is that you gain by walking away from money to serve.

1. This was a popular view starting with the Desert Fathers and running through the Middle Ages. Many believe that poverty was an essential commitment of anyone who was serious about following Jesus.⁸

D. A third group wants to argue that what Jesus is saying is, "Everyone is blessed now that the kingdom of God has begun to spread, even the have-nots."⁹

E. I'm in a fourth camp. I believe the way this statement would have been understood by those listening to Jesus was, "blessed are the spiritually humble – blessed are those who seek their desperate need for God, who understand their cosmic poverty and strike a humble posture. I base this in part on the ways certain Old Testament passages link the poor and the spiritually humble,¹⁰ but mostly on the way Matthew records this. He quotes Jesus saying, "blessed are the poor in spirit."

V. Let's keep reading so we see how things tie together. The second Beatitude.

A. The Second Beatitude is: Blessed are those who hunger now. It's another shocking, counter cultural statement.

B. I suppose we might think, blessed are those who hungry now because they are going to look good in a swim suit over spring break. But that is not what is meant.

C. Again, Matthew provides some great insight. He records Jesus saying, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness"

1. Dr. Kenneth Bailey, an American who spent his adult life serving as a missionary in the Middle East, said this passage came alive for him on a desert outing where one of their water jugs leaked, and a whole team ended up going two days in 110 degree heat.

VI. The Third and Fourth Beatitude:

A. "Blessed are those who weep now" is third. It is unthinkable just as the first two were. And so is the fourth, "blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man."

B. All of this is confusing and upside down, but it is about to come together. Pay attention.

C. Blessed are you when people hate you and exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because – and here is where this finally ties together. Leap for joy because “great is your reward in heaven.” Eternity changes everything. This is what ties it all together. Eternity changes everything.¹¹

D. This is not a call to suffer just to suffer. That’s masochism.¹² And this is not a promise that all suffering will be rewarded. Sometimes we suffer because we make a mess of things – because we are jerks. The promise here is that if we suffer for righteousness – for doing the right things – we will be rewarded.

E. But the point is, we will be rewarded. We have to look at the bigger picture. What you see is not all there is.

VII. There are two big ideas that have to come into focus for us to make any sense of what Jesus is saying. One, we are going to live after we die; and two: what we do here matters there.

A. The only way to make sense of Christ’s teaching, of Christ’s life, of the call he places on his disciples and on us is if we see that: what we see is not all we get; and, what we do today matters beyond today – it even matters beyond tomorrow. It matters beyond this life. This is the only way you can understand what Christ says and does.

B. But once you see it, it changes everything.

C. Men and women, we are going to live after we die. You are going to live after death and what you do today – what you do in this life, this one short life that you have – matters forever.

D. If there is no resurrection do not follow Jesus. If there is no resurrection, then the Romans won. Nietzsche is right – all that matters is power.¹³ Get as much as you can and bend everything to your will.

E. Think this through. Unpack the offer Jesus is making to his disciples – and to us. It only works in light of life after death. Without that this is the deal Jesus offers:

1. If you follow me I can promise you four things: poverty, hunger, misery and persecution – all in abundance. You will go without, you will cry, you will be unpopular but... (wait for it), but if you follow me and do what I am suggesting.... one day.... you will die and... it will stop. Who wants to sign up?

2. No! What he is saying is, “If you invest now. If you put yourself out now. If you live into the values of the kingdom of God now – even though it is hard and it costs you (and it will) – you will be rewarded.

F. Christ's teaching only makes sense in light of another world, another day, a coming kingdom. Christ's teaching only makes sense if (as promised) Jesus is going to defeat evil, bring order, make things right, establish a world based on very different values, one in which love wins, and reward those who have been working to that end already.

G. I told you this was upside down thinking.

VIII. You will not hear more radical ideas than you hear from Jesus.

A. The invitation he extends – to put yourself out, to suffer, to be taken advantage of – the invitation he extends looks particularly foolish today because we live in a world based on very different assumptions. Our culture does not look ahead. It is focused on now, the here not the hereafter. We see this in several ways:

1. We see this in our levels of debt. We have massive levels of personal, local, state and national debt because we want what we want when we want it, and we want it now. We are not willing to wait. Quite the contrary, we are willing to mortgage the future for pleasure in the present. We can hardly be counted on to save for retirement – only four percent of American has enough set aside when they reach 62. The idea of setting aside things for eternity gets even less attention.

2. We see this in our focus on youth. Our culture celebrates youth because youthfulness perpetuates the idea that we have got a long, long time before we die. As opposed to a normal culture – a healthy culture – where the young look up to the old, we live in a culture where the old look up on the young. As opposed to a normal culture where the older set the agenda, because they have lived longer and know more, we live in a culture where trends are set by the young. And as a result, after the age of 21, everyone wants to look younger than they are. People color their hair, wear make-up, have surgery, all in an effort to look younger.

3. We also see this in the way death is hidden. One hundred years ago people were around death all the time. Churches all had cemeteries out back. You watched people die. Most couples lost at least one child. You couldn't avoid it like we can today. Things are a bit better today than twenty years ago. The hospice movement has allowed those who choose to die at home in the presence of family, but death is still largely sealed off, regulated to the professionals. Many adults have never been with someone as they died.

B. We live in a world that focuses on the here not the hereafter. Indeed, we live in a world that avoids thinking about the hereafter. Even people who say they believe that they are going to live forever often spend more time thinking about their next vacation than they do thinking about eternity. But Christ's comments only make sense in light of life after we die. His comments about who is blessed – the poor, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are investing their lives in advancing a new kingdom – his words only make sense if we are going to live for hundreds of thousands of years.

C. If what we see is all there is, then following Jesus is a bad idea. But if we are going to live forever – and eternity is shaped by what we do today, then only a fool misses the opportunity to invest their time, talent and treasure in what's to follow.

D. If Jesus is right – if He is king – then we need to pay a lot less attention to comforts and rewards here and start asking ourselves: what can I do with my life – my one and only life – that matters in light of eternity? When I meet God what will I wish I had done?¹⁴

E. The only way to make sense of Jesus is if we live after we die. But if we live after we die, well, it's very hard to explain many of our lives today. Because we say we believe is that this life is brief, that it's the warm up, a dress rehearsal, but we live as if it's the main event.

IX. It's hard to wrap our mind around the idea and the implication of eternity. I've found it helpful to keep reminding myself of three things.

A. Life is short.

1. A few years ago Billy Graham was asked about what surprised him. He said, "Even though I knew that life was short. I am surprised at how short it has turned out to be."

2. I remember being the youngest guy in the room. And then I remember the first time I wasn't. In fact, I remember realizing that others were looking at me as if I was old. (I was in my early 30s at the time). Recently Sheri and I have been asked to host gatherings of young, married senior pastors to share from our great treasure trove of experience. And I guess there is something to this – we will have been married 30 years in August. I guess that starts to count for something, but more than anything it makes me marvel at how brief life is.

3. Life is short.

B. Eternity is not.

1. Life is short, but forever – which is what we are promised – is not short. It's also not easy to grasp. There are a variety of efforts to help us grasp eternity.
 - a) Some are comic. Eternity is keeping a smile on your face until the camera takes the picture. Eternity is a 45 minute spin class. Eternity is listening to a six year old relate the plot of a movie, the second hour of Monopoly.
 - b) Some are complicated. One of my former professors has written a few books on time and eternity. They are hundreds of pages long and I don't understand much of any of it.
2. These diagrams hint at it. (Derek's diagram)
3. In the end I simply appreciate statements like the one found in the third verse of Amazing Grace, "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun. We've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun."
4. We are going to live forever. That is what we are told. And therefore only a fool would be so wrapped up in this life. Only a fool would not invest this life in the next one. Especially since – point three

C. The opportunity to make a difference is now.

1. The thrust of Christ's statement here at the start of The Sermon on the Plane is, those who invest their life – their one and only life – in things that matter to God will be blessed.
2. And by the way, that attitude doesn't make us less influential here. Some complain that Christians are "too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good." That is only true if they are not thinking clearly. It should be just the opposite! As C.S. Lewis wrote:
 - a) If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither.

D. Life is short. Eternity is not. Opportunity is now.

X. Please do not misunderstand me.

A. Jesus is not saying that it's wrong to find joy in this life or suggest that we can never take a moment's break – that it's all about the future. That is not what the Bible teaches. Jesus went to parties, rested.

B. This is certainly not to suggest that if you want your life to count you should be on staff at a church or something like that. That is not what the Bible teaches.

C. Nor is this to suggest that we need to earn God's love. Christ's comments are not teaching us how to live so we earn our salvation. Our destiny is determined by our relationship with Christ.

D. But, men and women, this passage should take our breath away. Christ's comments – the core of his teaching – is profoundly disruptive if we are too focused on this life.

E. As is often the case, there is more here that deserves more reflection. Among the other obvious things we can learn from this section are the following:

1. Jesus is the perfect person! The good life he describes is the life he leads;
2. We should not be surprised when we suffer. Indeed, we should worry if we do not!¹⁵

F. But let's not miss – or dilute – the big idea. What we do matters and it will matter long after we die. Heaven is hard to imagine, but it's quite clear that we are not all equal there. It's quite clear that there are degrees of reward in heaven just as there are degrees of punishment in hell. About half of Christ's parables teach that. And Paul teaches that as well.¹⁶

XI. There are so many implications that flow out of these words.

A. You would do yourself a favor to memorize them or at least parts of this sermon.

B. I hope you will make it a point to wrestle with the implications of Christ's words in your small groups this week. This is life changing stuff.

C. And I trust that the next time someone is talking about the need for young people to start early with their 401K plan so there is something set aside, you will think – the real tragedy is not people getting a late start saving for retirement. The real tragedy is people not storing up treasure in heaven, where moth and rust cannot rot and thieves cannot break in and steal.

D. What we do now matters – in large part because it shapes what follows. Blessed are those who are serving. If you are looking for your rewards here you just may get them – but they will not last. Invest your life. We will have all of eternity to celebrate the victories, but only a short hour before sunset in which to win them.

XII. Quotes¹⁷

XIII. Announcements

A. What we want to hear is “well done good and faithful servant.”

B. Update about fiscal year and need to close \$ shortfall.

¹ John Stott, Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount, IVP, 1978, p. 30.

² The debate over whether this is one or different sermons began in the early church. By the time of Augustine the two different sermon conclusion was the most popular. Later, Bonaventure suggested that after Jesus came down from the mountain – where he gave the longer version – he gave a slightly modified, shorter version to those who had not gone up. This included the Pharisees and this is why Jesus added the “woe” sections.

³ Matthew’s account takes less than ten minutes to read. Luke’s account takes just over two. These are the Cliffs Notes. Some of these people have come a long way to hear Jesus.

⁴ There are two Greek words that are translated “blessed” in English: eulogeo, which is not used in the Beatitudes, is the term used when someone wants to be blessed; makarios is “not part of a wish and not used to invoke a blessing.” Rather, it recognizes a state of good fortune. The term used here is not asking for something, but describing / affirming a quality that already exists. The third Beatitude should not be understood to mean that “if you are meek you will inherit the earth,” but “Look at the authentic spiritual richness and joy of those people who are meek.” (Kenneth Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, IVP p. 68.)

⁵ What is set out in the Beatitudes (here and in Matthew) is not for the elite, it is the goal for all Christ followers.

⁶ As Ambrose noted, Jesus is not condemning those who are rich in a sweeping way, but as elsewhere, he is indicating that those who are not encumbered by riches have incentives to fix their aspirations on higher things that the rich person often lacks. The problem with the rich person is not riches per se – wealth is strictly, in spiritual terms, as neutral as poverty – the difficulty in practice is that many of those who have riches ‘do not know how to use them.’” Ambrose, Exposition of Luke 5.69.

⁷ The church has always been wrong whenever it has used the first beatitude either to condone the poverty of the masses or to comment the voluntary poverty of monks and others who have taken a vow to renounce possessions. Christ may indeed still call some to a life of poverty, but his call cannot justly be heard through this beatitude. (Stott, p. 32).

⁸ St. Francis of Assisi would be in this camp.

⁹ To the extent that I understand him, I believe this is Dallas Willard's view from *The Divine Conspiracy*.

¹⁰ See Isaiah 66:2: But this is the man to whom I will look / he that is poor and contrite in spirit / and trembles at my word.

¹¹ Christians are to live *sub specie aeternitatis* – that is, “in view of eternity.”

¹² We are not expected to seek suffering. We are urged to see that suffering is an extraordinary teacher. We cannot grow like we want to grow without suffering and pain. Pain rearranges our priorities. People who have not suffered tend to be pretty shallow. Suffering helps us see what matters.

¹³ “Probably nobody has hated the ‘softness’ of the Sermon on the Mount more than Friedrich Nietzsche. Although the son and the grandson of Lutheran pastors, he rejected Christianity during his student days. His book *The anti-Christ* (a title he had dared to apply to himself in his autobiographical sketch *Ecce homo*) is his most violent anti-Christian polemic and was written in 1888, the year before he went mad. In it he defines what is ‘good’ as ‘all that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man’, and what is ‘bad’ as ‘all that proceeds from weakness’. Consequently, in answer to his own question, ‘What is more harmful than any vice?’, he replies, ‘Active sympathy for the ill-constituted and weak – Christianity as a religion instead of a power; so ‘nothing in our unhealthy modernity is more unhealthy than Christian pity.’ He despises ‘the Christian conception of God – God as God of the sick, God as a spider, God as spirit’ – a conception from which ‘everything strong, brave, masterful, proud’ has been eliminated. ‘In the entire New Testament there is only one solitary figure one is obliged to respect,’ he affirms, and that is Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Jesus, by contact, he disdains as ‘God on the cross’, and Christianity as ‘mankind’s greatest misfortune.’ The cause of his venom is plain. The ideal that Jesus commended is the little child. He lent no support whatever to Nietzsche’s commendation of the ‘superman’. So Nietzsche repudiated the whole value-system of Jesus. ‘I condemn Christianity,’ he wrote. ‘The Christian church has left nothing untouched by its depravity, it has made of every value a disvalue.’ Instead (in the last words of his book) he called for a ‘revaluation of all values’.” Stott, p. 54f.

¹⁴ What would my schedule look like, what would my spending habits look like, if God was really in charge of my life.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer wrote, “Suffering then, is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his master. Following Christ means *passio passiva*, suffering because we have to suffer. That is why Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true Church, and one of the memoranda drawn up in preparation for the Augsburg Confession similarly defines the Church as the community of those “who are persecuted and martyred for the gospel’s sake... Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer. In fact, it is a joy and a token of his grace. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 80, 81.)

¹⁶ In Philippians 4, after thanking them for their support of his ministry, he says: You sent me aid more than once when I was in need. Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account.

¹⁷ Quotes: 1) As I grow older, I care less and less what people think about me and more and more what God thinks of me. I expect to be with him much longer than with you. Robert Baker; 2) Anybody who enters into fellowship with Jesus must undergo a transvaluation of values. Helmut Thielicke; 3) Blessed are the sat upon, spat upon, ratted on. Paul Simon.