



# The Kingdom of Blessing

## Advent Study

### Lesson 1

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**Read: Matthew 13:10-17**

#### Thy Will Be Done

Advent is about the Kingdom of God. Its theme song could be: “The Kingdom has come. The Kingdom is here. The Kingdom is coming.” God’s kingdom is the rule of His loving will, the sovereignty of His saving purpose and plan for all His creation.

But what kind of kingdom is God’s? When Matthew wrote about the kingdom of heaven he meant the very same thing as the Kingdom of God in the other Gospels. Given his obviously great learning and skills in Old Testament scholarship and theology, it’s not surprising that he avoided the less-reverent usage of God’s name in favor of the more traditional practice of substituting a more stylized reference of “heaven.”

Christians have argued about the nature of God’s kingdom since the beginning of the Church. Some see it as a new, more purified legal system than Judaism. Others see it as a kind of love that has no judgment, no consequences, and no accountability. Still others conceive of it as a mystical state of contemplating God Himself. However, the Scriptures do not present any such simplistic, one-dimensional picture of the Lord’s personal rule. Matthew’s Gospel certainly doesn’t either.

This series of studies about God’s kingdom will focus on the Beatitudes, the blessings found in Matthew, chapter 5. For the kingdom that God brought us in Jesus and will complete upon his return is a kingdom of His blessing. The Incarnate Lord Jesus, Emmanuel, is the embodiment of God’s kingdom among us. The Jesus born in Bethlehem is the Kingdom of God—God’s greatest blessing.

Blessed are the eyes that see and the ears that hear the good news of God’s kingdom. This is God’s gift to us in Jesus.

*R&D How would you explain Jesus’ preaching the Kingdom of God? How would you illustrate His kingdom from your own experience of God’s blessings?*

*Prayer: The Lord bless us and keep us. The Lord make his face to shine upon us, and be gracious unto us. The Lord lift us the light of his countenance upon us, and give us peace, both now and evermore.*

### Lesson 2

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**Read: Matthew 11:1-11**

#### Thy Will Be Done

Matthew’s Gospel was by far the most popular one in the early church. It was the one most cited by the early church fathers, the authoritative teachers upon whom we still rely for an accurate interpretation of the Bible. Matthew was considered the most complete and useful Gospel for the instruction of new believers, a sort of baptism and confirmation preparation book. This status may

be one reason why it was considered from the start as the first of the Gospels to be written. That priority is much debated among scholars now, but it continues to be invaluable in the hearts and lives of many of God's people today because it gives us a full picture of the kingdom and the King who is Jesus.

John the Baptist had pointed to Jesus as the first in God's kingdom when Jesus came to be baptized. John later sought some confirmation about Jesus' identity as the Messiah: "Are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another?" Jesus responded by pointing to his ministry of healing and life-changing teaching. He pointed out that those who accept him ("not offended by me") are blessed. The signs of God's rule breaking into this world, His will, are done through the words and actions of Jesus. John the Baptist is honored, "Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Why? Those "in the kingdom of heaven" have a greater spiritual heritage than John because they will have experienced Christ's finished work on the Cross.

The Beatitudes introduce us to the kingdom life-style—who we are and how we live when we are part of that kingdom. They give us the picture of the kingdom enacted in our lives as we follow Jesus as his disciples.

*R&D Compare how you use the four Gospels—which is your favorite? Which one do you consult most often, quote most often? Which one speaks to your heart and mind with the most power?*

*Prayer: Come, Lord Jesus, and rule in my heart and mind this day and forevermore.*

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### Lesson 3

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**Read: Matthew 20:17-26**

#### On Earth as It Is in Heaven

We are exploring some dimensions of God's kingdom as preparation for applying the Beatitudes to our lives today. After Jesus taught many parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." he presented us with his means of establishing his kingdom and how we accept his Lordship.

In contrast to the ambition of the mother of James and John, Jesus pointed out that for us to share in his kingdom we must walk the way of the cross as he did—by dying to self and by accepting the call to serve rather than exercising pride and arrogance which is always selfish.

The Beatitudes present us with a method of walking the way of the Cross, of living as servant disciples of Jesus. They describe the grace of God at work within us. Bonhoeffer wrote that "the fellowship of the beatitudes is the fellowship of the Crucified." The Beatitudes are how we walk the way of the Cross in spiritual growth, in moral formation, and in the joy of union with God through Jesus. These blessings are foundational to our Christian life, which is why they are both a preface and a summary of the Sermon on the Mount. They are a capsule of Gospel living that confront us with the counter-cultural kingdom that is not of this world.

The Beatitudes are not our "merit badges" for our accomplishments in holy living. They describe the basic ways in which we have a living faith—an active relationship with God through Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.

*R&D In what ways and at what times have you sought to be Jesus' "right hand man" in your church and family? Consider the contrast of drinking the same cup he did—by surrendering yourself and your life to him as Lord.*

Prayer: *O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light rises up in darkness for the godly; Grant us, in our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what You would have us to do, that the Spirit of Wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in Your light we may see light, and in Your straight path we may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

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#### Lesson 4

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**Read: Matthew 4:1-17**

##### **The Blessing Begins**

“From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (v.17). With these words, Jesus announced the start of his ministry and the enactment of God’s kingdom on earth “as it is in heaven.” But he was tested before he started, and he would be tested again and again, as we are. While crowds followed for a time, they fell away when the truth of this kingdom became clearer. His disciples misunderstood and the religious establishment constantly confronted him, trying to trick him into treason or blasphemy. Temptations confront us as we follow Jesus—which is why we need the outline of the Kingdom of God that Jesus gave us in the Sermon on the Mount.

Satan’s three temptations of Jesus are ours: (1) to depend on worldly power instead of God’s Word; (2) to play games with God’s love instead of trusting Him; and (3) to worship and serve ourselves or God’s creation instead the Lord alone. The Beatitudes are given to us as the dynamic grace of God that moves us toward Himself instead of into decay and dereliction when we fall to those temptations.

The Kingdom of God is a gift to be received, a challenge that can only be met with God’s grace, a test that can only be overcome with God’s Word, and it’s a blessing to share. The Greek word for blessing is *markarios*, which means happy, fortunate. For the disciple of Jesus, the joy of knowing God in the person of Jesus is the joy of heaven itself—this is the blessing with which we are blessed so that we may be a blessing and thus fulfill the promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3).

*R&D Prayerfully review both the ways you have been tempted and failed the test, and how you have met those tests with God’s help.*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner; speak through me to others and be present with me for others.*

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#### Lesson 5

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**Read: Matthew 5:1-12**

##### **The Nature of These Blessings**

God is in the blessing business. He wants us to be happy, and he wants us to be holy. The two are inseparable for we will never be at peace, never have authentic joy, never know or receive or give true love without union with the living God who made us, sustains us, and loves us perfectly. He calls us to a holy life which is living in His will, surrendered to His Lordship, and showing the world what He is like by the way we treat others. Therefore, the “blessing” of His kingdom as described in these Beatitudes really means to be holy and happy in God Himself.

The Beatitudes have been variously interpreted through the ages and are often subjected to distortion or misrepresentation to serve one or another agenda or bias a person may have. It’s very easy for us to evade the demands of God’s kingdom by making it impossible or irrelevant. For

example, in church history the Beatitudes have been variously described as: a new legal system replacing the old covenant law; an impossible ideal to bring us to repentance; a spirituality for the elite, an aristocracy of the totally dedicated “super-Christians”; a program of social justice; a temporary ethic for those who were waiting the brief time before they expected Jesus to return in glory; or as a feasible plan for wise living by anyone. None of these interpretations are adequate to understand the Beatitudes or the Kingdom of God.

Both Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine saw the Beatitudes as describing the Christian’s ascent to the transforming vision of God, enjoying His presence in fullness. They describe a continuous journey in grace in which we share more and more deeply His kingdom present and to come in Christ.

*R&D How have you experienced joy in God? How can you enter into more of it?*

*Prayer: Cleanse us, O Lord, from our secret faults, and mercifully absolve us from our presumptuous sins, that we may receive Your holy things with a pure mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

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## Lesson 6

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**Read: Matthew 5:1-3, 6:19-34**

### The Door Opens

How do we enter into the Kingdom of God through the door of reliance upon God? It’s a decision to trust Him rather than putting our trust in ourselves—our money, social position, nationality, learning, or physical appearance. We may enter into poverty of spirit by way of economic loss or through the awareness of our role in broken relationships, seeing our sin in all its destructive ugliness or “hitting bottom” in our addiction. It may simply come as realization of God’s goodness and our utter need for him. Luther cried out on his deathbed, “We are all beggars.” One way or another, the way through the door of spiritual poverty is our crying out to God for His love, His mercy, His grace, and His presence in our lives.

Jesus clearly taught that when we accept him as the Messiah, the Savior and the Light and Medicine of the world, God gives us the grace of recognizing our spiritual poverty. This is how we begin to live out our renouncing the world, the flesh, and the devil, and allow the Lord to begin healing our pride by the grace of his justification by faith. Thereby we enter into the blessed freedom as children of God who know our Father desires only the best for us—His loving kindness that does not fail.

Justification is God’s acceptance, His approval of us as we dwell in Christ and he dwells in us. The other blessings will flow from this evangelical gift—the gift of faith by grace that enables us to worship, serve, and depend upon God alone. No longer self-satisfied, self-reliant, or self-serving, we belong to Him now and forever and our joy begins, for we are truly blessed.

*R&D Do you recall your baptism, or when you came to realize that you needed Jesus as your Savior? Have you given daily thanks for your faith and your baptism? If not, now is the time to start.*

*Prayer: Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom every family in heaven and earth is named, grant me to be strengthened with might by his Holy Spirit, that, Christ dwelling in my heart by faith, I may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

## Lesson 7

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**Read: Matthew 5:1-3; Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11; Psalm 71:1-6, 12**

### The Door to Blessing

The Beatitudes are not disconnected, anecdotal proverbs—they are a coherent program of spiritual growth in God’s grace that leads us deeper and deeper into His kingdom. If you read the whole Sermon on the Mount in one sitting, it will be like taking a quiet retreat, listening to the Lord opening His plan for us and guiding us in the Way.

Each blessing prepares us to receive and live in the next, and each blessing builds on the previous ones. They don’t describe an always onward and upward achievement, but rather, a process that may well pause or even lose ground, all the while serving as a program of growing in grace meant for all disciples of Jesus. Claiming one blessing opens the door to another.

The “poor in spirit” are blessed with the joy of God’s kingdom. “In spirit” is the more accurate way to present this gift than Luke’s shorter “blessed are the poor” which is too often misinterpreted as meaning only those who are financially in need. “The poor in spirit” is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls and, therefore, has precedence. These “poor” are what the Old Testament means as the faithful people of God—those who have learned their total dependence upon the Lord, who seek from Him alone the sustenance of His love and presence. Those who have a “humble and contrite spirit” are those who are faithful to God. They know He alone is their hope and salvation in this life and the next (rather than relying on themselves). “He only who is reduced to nothing in himself, and relies on the mercy of God, is poor in spirit” (Calvin).

*R&D Have you realized and acknowledged your spiritual bankruptcy before God? Do you turn to Him daily, asking for your daily bread of His grace and love?*

*Prayer: Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings with Your most gracious favor, and further us with Your continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in You, we may glorify Your holy Name, and finally, by Your mercy, obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

## Lesson 8

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**Read: Matthew 5:3; Psalm 119:129-136; Romans 7:13-25**

### The Door to Pardon

Each Beatitude challenges our world-view and understanding of ourselves. Once we enter into poverty of spirit by faith through grace, we are ready to see God’s holiness contrasted to our sin. The blessing of mourning is not a false happiness in bereavement or sorrow for any loss; but in Thomas Cranmer’s words “We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness.” While our society and many a church today have largely lost a strong sense of our sinfulness, our fallenness from God, nevertheless, the condition still remains a reality for each of us.

It is a tragic and dangerous numbness to the reality of our sin, and that of the world. It can lead us into what one woman in my first parish exclaimed: “I don’t know why we have to say the Confession of Sin so often. I don’t need it!” Claiming our own need for God’s mercy, for the cleansing by the Cross of Jesus, is the essential result of our spiritual poverty, and it’s never a one-time deal. God’s gift of tears for our own sins and the destructive, damning sin of the world is something we share with all the saints. The pattern of spiritual growth is that the more we know of God’s goodness through knowing and following Jesus, the more aware we are of our need for

pardon. This is called contrition, and it's the second blessing of God's kingdom. It's the blessing that brings us more and more into God's gentle, healing, and strengthening grace.

Only when we use God's standards to evaluate ourselves are we ready to enjoy His kingdom, now and when Jesus returns.

*R&D Taking our spiritual temperature is not just reserved for Lent. How could you benefit from examining daily where you have been unfaithful and disobedient to God's will?*

*Prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, You hate nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of You all mercy, perfect remission, and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

## **Lesson 9**

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**Read: Matthew 5:4; Isaiah 40:1-8; 61:3; Revelation 7:13-17**

### **The Comfort of God**

The first three Beatitudes are a powerful, cleansing, and healing antidote to the deadly reality of sin. They constitute what has traditionally been called "purgation," the process of becoming detached from those things that block God's active love in our lives, His grace in Jesus. These blessings of divine reality, therapy, and healing free us from our bondage in order to enjoy God's presence and love more each day.

Yet, our culture despises such repentance and teaches us exaggerated notions of our importance by continually stroking our self-esteem. Instead, we should esteem God, discover our true selves and rejoice in His forgiveness. How many of us have ever experienced what John Stott shared from the journal of an early American missionary, David Brainerd, that he wrote on October 18, 1740: "In my morning devotions my soul was exceedingly melted, and bitterly mourned over my exceeding sinfulness and vileness"? Stott wrote, "Tears like this are the holy water which God is said to store in his bottle" (Psalm 56:8).

In my spiritual journey, my first sacramental confession of sin was made as a new Christian and freshman in college with fear and trembling, yet the joy and relief following absolution was a wonderful new gift. The consolation of God's forgiveness is incomparable, and far more powerful than all the self-indulgences and pretensions of self-justifications of our selfish sins. The blessing of mourning for sin is a release from the deception of lies and deceit that trap us in the prison of ourselves.

*R&D Carefully and prayerfully consider the truth of 1 John 1:8-9: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

*Prayer: Almighty Father, who gave Your only Son to die for our sins and to rise for our justification: Give us grace so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, that we may always serve You in pureness of living and truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

## Lesson 10

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**Read: Matthew 5:1-5; Psalm 37:1-11, 34**

### Meek? Me?

Because the Beatitudes present us with a world-view that is opposite from the standards and values that this world cherishes, they can be both astonishing and perplexing to us. Yet, the third dimension or cycle of grace in our spiritual growth is meekness. It's the next step in our purgation, our self-renunciation in order to affirm the Lordship of Jesus in our lives. It is the power of grace to imitate Jesus who, while "meek and lowly," is the Savior of all who put their trust in him and the example of obedience and holiness we are to copy.

The structure of the Scripture is very important to note. As we continue to practice poverty of spirit and contrition, the door opens to new growth in godly character. What does this meekness really mean? The key is the Greek word that means "gentle, humble, considerate, courteous." It's an attitude that enables us to become more teachable by God.

A "gentle spirit" is one that is not self-assertive, but open to being formed, trained, and ready to learn more. The restraint and decorum that so many viewers enjoy portrayed in the popular *Downton Abbey* television series is lacking in our society now since we have devalued manners, courtesy, and politeness. Yet, it's the very basic level of being meek—willingness to be taught how to consider others by not putting ourselves first. It's the grace of a servant to God that is reflected in our acknowledgment we need to learn more of His ways. When we are meek before God, we know and show more of His love.

*R&D Recall your experiences of growth in meekness, a gentle spirit.*

*Prayer: Almighty God, You have given Your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

## Lesson 11

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**Read: Matthew 5:5; Hebrews 4:1-10, 11:1, 8-10**

### The Inheritance

The gift of God to the meek is "to inherit the earth," yet another paradoxical and puzzling promise and blessing. If we understand the grace of a "gentle spirit," and by God's grace practice our dependence upon God in Christ and our posture of penitence, then we are available to God's gift of meekness. How can that bring about an impossible status, as heirs of the earth? Here is where Matthew's solid connections of Jesus' teaching and ministry with the Old Testament are essential to our accessing this grace.

In Isaiah 57:13b God tells us that "he who takes refuge in me shall possess the land and shall inherit my holy mountain." This land is the Promised Land—not of earthly geography, but Jesus' kingdom that "is not of this world." The Promised Land is the city of God, His kingdom itself, the "rest" referred to in Hebrews—heaven itself. By faith and the life of grace we are heirs with Christ of God's kingdom in its fullness, which will triumph over the world in the last great day of our Lord's return. This promised land is already realized by grace in our lives now, when we are surrendered to God and grieve for sin. We are God's people in a foreign land, a "colony of heaven" that witnesses to the world with God's truth and love evident in our lives.

There is a close unity among the first three Beatitudes and it opens the door for all the other blessings of God. It is the unity of true and lively faith by following Jesus that frees us to be, like Paul, “as having nothing, yet possessing everything.”

*R&D Read Galatians 4:1-7 and claim God’s gift to you, by faith and baptism, of your inheritance—His kingdom land. And then enjoy His peace that passes all understanding in this world.*

*Prayer: O God, You led Your ancient people by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night: Grant that we, who serve You now on earth, may come to the joy of that heavenly Jerusalem where all tears are wiped away and where Your saints for ever sing Your praise; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

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## Lesson 12

**Read: Matthew 5:1-6; Isaiah 55:1-6; Psalm 42:1-5**

### God’s Effective Power

The joy of the first set of three Beatitudes is entering the gift of God’s approval in Jesus Christ by way of faith, surrender, and obedience—dying to self in order for God’s life to be born and grow in us. The way of purgation is the door that opens for us to continue in the dynamic relationship with God given to us through Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Christian’s essential first and continuing step in the spiritual life as a disciple. We don’t get a diploma or certificate of recognition when we accept those gifts and graces of spiritual cleansing. It’s an ongoing, living relationship with the Lord that must be sustained and maintained by all the means of grace in prayer, Bible study, and sacramental worship in the fellowship of Christ’s Church. To make a confession of faith and then fall into nominal passivity of the lukewarm believer simply means we have become one of those seeds that don’t live to produce a harvest of love in God’s Kingdom.

The next Beatitude opens the next door in God’s house—that of sanctifying growth in God’s holiness, traditionally called “illumination.” Disciples of Jesus who deeply want to see more and more of God’s righteousness in them, in his Church, and in the world, are promised that they will enjoy the grace of that kingdom growth, both now and in the fulfillment of the kingdom to come. God’s rule, his righteousness, is established by the Cross of Jesus, abides in the heart of believer, and will be fulfilled in totality when Jesus returns.

*R&D How does your life show the fruit of God’s righteousness? Is it more mature fruit than when you were younger in the faith? A disciple is a learner who gladly grows in grace and truth.*

*Prayer: O God, because without You we are not able to please You, mercifully grant that Your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

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## Lesson 13

**Read: Matthew 5:6; John 7:37-39; Psalm 107:1-9**

### Kingdom Growth

It’s important to realize that the righteousness for which the blessed hunger and thirst is not that of a legal achievement, but rather is a grace to be received by faith. The Greek word for this righteousness is *Dikaisoune*, which A. M. Hunter describes as a chameleon in the Scriptures—it takes on all shades of meaning. By paying close attention to the Old Testament, especially as



echoed in Mary's song, the *Magnificat*, the earnest desire to see God's triumph is the blessing itself since we already receive it as members of His kingdom and look forward to its cosmic culmination when Jesus returns. It's the classic picture drawn by Oscar Cullman of D-Day securing the future victory that enables us to press on to the final day of triumph. God began to fulfill His promise of the kingdom on the Cross of Jesus, and as we "seek first" that kingdom we enter into His righteousness, His victory.

This unfolding of faith's fruit in us has already begun to mold us and make us more and more into the character of Christ. As we grow in imitating his surrender to the Father, the fruits of repentance will become more evident in our lives of growing love. The joy of this growth is complete only when Jesus' kingdom is fully established at his second advent. The grace of a "gentle spirit" in the previous Beatitude enables us to be receptive and eager for more of God's leading and power. The follower of Jesus gladly and readily praises God as the source, embodiment, and goal of all goodness. Holiness is the "more" that the Lord pours into our hearts as we continue to trust Him.

*R&D Reflect on the wonderful truth that once we "see" the kingdom of God's love ruling our hearts, the more we want to see and the more He shows us.*

*Prayer: Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your promise that enables us to wait for the new heavens and the new earth in which your righteousness dwells, where we shall neither hunger nor thirst anymore since you are our Good Shepherd who gives us living water.*

## Lesson 14

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**Read: Matthew 5:7, 18:21-35, [25:31-46]**

### Shared Mercy

The blueprint of our life in Christ opens to us more grace as we increasingly desire God's will to be done in our lives. As the first three Beatitudes describe the evangelical grace of conversion completed, so the second set of blessings portray the catholic grace of sanctification by grace. True faith is lived out by the exercise of active love toward our neighbor. When we share with others the mercy we have received through Christ we are bearing the fruit of holy love. The first dimensions of blessing free us from self and selfishness so that we are then open and, by grace, able to witness by our behavior. John Stott wrote that the "righteousness of the heart" is "outwardly visible in words, deeds, and relationships." That enacted mercy shows the Kingdom of God's love to others.

As we continue to need the peace of God's pardon, so the only way we can continue to walk in that freedom is by extending forgiveness to those who offend us. "Forgive us our sins/trespases as we forgive those who sin/trespas against us" is part of our prayer as disciples that Jesus gave us. It's the prayer of the kingdom, and that kingdom is one of blessings—received and given away. Sadly, too many church members cling to resentments and even hatreds in their hearts, which has the same effect on their souls as hardening of arteries on our physical hearts and cancers in our lungs. They block God's grace in us and destroy us. They prevent the water of life that is the Holy Spirit from flowing into and through us.

Just as the Good Samaritan was merciful to the traveler who had suffered a violent mugging, so we demonstrate God's love for us by not only forgiving others but also giving His loving care in concrete acts.

R&D *When and how have others shown you mercy? Give thanks for them. How do you show mercy to others now?*

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, whose blessed Son came not to be served but to serve: give us Your grace to follow in his steps by giving ourselves to the service of others; that with wisdom, patience, and courage, we may minister in his Name to the suffering, the friendless, and the needy; for the love of him who laid down his life for us, Your Son our Savior Jesus Christ.*

## Lesson 15

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**Read: Matthew 5:8, 23:25-27; Psalm 24; Revelation 22:3-4**

### The Safety Seal

How many times have you struggled with the safety seal on a medicine bottle? The purpose of the seal is to guarantee the purity of the contents. Similarly, the seal of the Holy Spirit given to us in baptism and renewed by faithful prayer is given to us to guarantee the purity of our heart (2 Corinthians 1:21-22). This second grace of sanctification brings us the joy of being focused on our Lord—as the song goes: “Keep your eyes upon Jesus. Look on his wonderful face.” As we pay attention to him, listen to him, and wait upon him in prayer and Bible study, we are more and more able to reject distractions from the world, the flesh, and the devil.

While the religious establishment of Israel in New Testament times was focused on ceremonial and legal observance as a substitute for true faith and active love, we, also, are tempted to count up our “brownie points” of church work and minimum morality instead of the harder heart work of transparency to God and others. Because hypocrisy is born of the “divided self,” God wants to bless us with the grace of true sincerity before Him and others. This is not sinlessness, for only Jesus is absolutely pure and sinless. But it is a real centering on God.

*The Message* paraphrase puts it this way: “You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.” When we look on Jesus and watch where he is going in our lives, then we recognize his presence in the lives of others.

R&D *Read and pray Psalm 62:1-2 and consider how you have been waiting upon the Lord and how you might schedule the time and place to do so more attentively.*

Prayer: *Create in us clean hearts, O God, and sustain us with Your Holy Spirit.*

## Lesson 16

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**Read: Matthew 5:8; Psalm 34:1-15**

### Clarity of Vision

Sometimes I’m amazed at how dirty and smudged my prescription eyeglasses become in such a short time. Just as remarkable is the clarity of vision after they are cleaned. So it is with our souls. When we keep them clean before the Lord by self-examination, confession of sin, praising His holy Name and purposefully obeying Him in daily life, we are clean in Christ and enjoy God’s fellowship. Only the truly sincere, the pure in heart, can begin to see God in this life and fully, in His glory, in the life to come. Of course, we see spiritually, by enjoying the blessing of His presence. There are moments in Holy Communion, praying, and Bible reading that we come so close to the presence of the Lord we are transcended into another dimension of life. Those moments can come most often for me in adoration and when I’m praying for others for their needs.

God promises our life in Christ will be perfected and completed in heaven when we enjoy His “nearer presence” without the obstruction of this world, our sin, and our physical needs. This is traditionally called the “Beatific Vision,” for God is utter, complete beauty and blessing; and to see Him means that we share in His wonder and glory. He enables us to have the joy of glimpses of Him now, by grace, as we trust and obey Him whole-heartedly with a “single-eye.” The joy to come is perfect and to be desired. But the joy of being aware of God’s presence now is a great blessing, indeed. We don’t earn that privilege, it’s a gift; but we open that gift when we pay attention to what is ultimately important—God Himself.

*R&D In prayer, ask the Lord to cleanse your heart and soul.*

*Prayer: Grant, we pray, Almighty God, that as we believe Your only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into heaven, so we may also in heart and mind there ascend, and with him continually dwell; through the same Jesus Christ, the Bishop and Shepherd of our souls.*

### Lesson 17

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**Read: Matthew 5:9; Colossians 1:15-23; Ephesians 2:13-22**

#### **The Blessing of Peace**

As we begin considering the last three Beatitudes, we need to consider the easy temptation to handle these blessings carelessly and to accept a simplistic understanding of these profound gifts of grace. The blessing of peacemaking has too often been subjected to this kind of distortion as much or more than the other Beatitudes. To recognize and claim the blessing of being made the sons and daughters of God, we must ask for discernment and understanding in order to grow in God’s grace.

The peace of God, that peace which passes all understanding, is alive, active, and has transforming power. When we are peacemakers we are not just passively peaceable or even peace loving. Just as the grace of peace is dynamic, so is the ministry of peacemaking. God’s peace is not a matter of negotiation, compromise, formal agreements, or even the end of open hostilities. Divine peacemaking is never a matter of appeasement, either. The peace of God in us is *shalom*, the harmony and well being of being secure in His love and family. In other words, God’s peace in us is happiness and holiness at work within us and through us.

The work of peacemaking is essential because of the reality of sin in this fallen, dark, dangerous, and destructive world. The world, the flesh, and the devil are death-giving substitutes to the living God, the giver of life. We are given the peace of the Lord as a great blessing—never to keep to ourselves, but always to share with others. In our next study, we will look at the specifics of this peacemaking ministry.

*R&D How have you shared the health, happiness, and holiness of God’s shalom? In what new ways might you?*

*Prayer: Most holy God, the source of all good desires, all right judgments, and all just works: Give to us, Your servants, that peace which the world cannot give, so that our minds may be fixed on the doing of Your will, and that we, being delivered from the fear of all enemies, may live in peace and quietness; through the mercies of Christ Jesus our Savior.*

## Lesson 18

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**Read: Matthew 5:9; 1 Peter 3:8-12; Hebrews 12:12-17; Romans 12:14-21**

### The Ministry of Peace

What is involved in being a Christian peacemaker? The Scriptures make it clear that this active and life-giving work of grace has manifold dimensions. It involves simple hospitality, refraining from rudeness, hostility, and reactive assertion of self, but also much more.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:11, 18-20a: “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others...All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself...and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ.” To be a godly, grace-filled, and blessed peacemaker, is to actively take up the holy work of reconciliation between God and a lost humanity. Christ accomplished the hardest part of reconciliation on the Cross. His sacrifice of perfect love and obedience led him to win the victory over Satan, death, and despair. Our part is to be witnesses to this good news. Therefore, to be one who shares the peace of the Lord means to be active in sharing the Gospel of God in word and deed.

When we love others as the servants of a loving God of all, we are serving the “Prince of Peace” in his peacemaking, reconciling work of salvation. He made peace on the Cross, and we share his peace when we tell others of his life-giving love. When, in liturgical churches, we share “The Peace of the Lord be always with you” we too often simply say to each other only “peace,” forgetting that it is not *our* peace we share, but the peace of the Lord, the peace of God. He gives all true peace, all *shalom*, in Jesus.

*R&D Are you a silent Christian? Pray for someone with whom you can gently, lovingly share how God has blessed you as a disciple of Jesus.*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your name.*

## Lesson 19

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**Read: Matthew 5:9; Romans 8:12-17; Galatians 3:23-29**

### God’s Family

With the blessing of peacemaking comes the greatest joy of God’s pleasure in us. All the Beatitudes give us deeper and deeper grace as we persevere in walking in the way of the Cross. As we enjoy each blessing, we are being prepared for greater service, ever more intimately empowered by the Holy Spirit to do the work of God here on earth. We are part of the Body of Christ, who are anointed with the same Holy Spirit that came upon Jesus at his baptism. As he is the Incarnate Son of God among us, so we are the sacramental signs of his kingdom of love and peace.

The Holy Spirit binds us to God through Jesus. The work of His gifts of faith, the word of God written in the Bible, the sacraments, and especially the union of believing communicants with God in Holy Communion, all strengthen of our lives as the adopted children of God. Peacemaking is kingdom sharing. As we obediently share the good news of Jesus, we are loving people with God’s love, which only He can give, but who blesses us to be His blessing of peace in the world.

Sonship was the term used in ancient Rome to describe an adopted child being invested as the heir of the estate. Both men and women are adopted into God’s family as the heirs of the

Kingdom of God, fellow heirs with Christ of God's rule of love. We are brought into that kingdom by faith and baptism, and living in all the previous blessings God gives us we share the good news of how everyone can enjoy this gift.

*R&D Martin Luther gave daily thanks for his baptism. How do you offer God your gratitude for adopting you as His child?*

*Prayer: Grant, O merciful God, that Your Church, being gathered together in unity by Your Holy Spirit, may show forth Your power among all peoples, to the glory of Your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

## Lesson 20

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**Read: Matthew 5:10; 1 Peter 3:13-22; Acts 5:40-42**

### Double Trouble

God's grace accepts us in Christ by cleaning us up and adopting us as His children in baptism and faith. He then continues to transform us by the grace that molds and makes us to conform increasingly to the mind of Christ. He also enables us to bear the fruit of love with the same grace that unites us to His heart as we bear His Name and resemblance in the world. The work of the Holy Spirit in justifying and sanctifying us opens the last door of blessing in these remaining Beatitudes.

It may seem that verses 10-12 constitute only a single Beatitude, and many commentators have taken them as such. However, it is more accurate to see two blessings in them, both related to the same reaction of the world to faithful Christian believers and witnesses. The nine Beatitudes constitute a perfect number in the Bible, indicative of God's complete work, His new creation. Structure is important in the Gospel according to Matthew, so this division is reasonable. These last two blessings cap the ongoing process of our becoming closer to God by following Jesus all the way to the Cross.

The crux, the literal "cross" of persecution, is because it is "for righteousness sake," which could be inexplicable except that Jesus is the righteous one whom the world rejects and we carry his name. His disciple is one with him, never more closely than when we are scorned, ridiculed, discriminated against, and even unjustly accused because of faith in Christ. Righteousness here is the triumph of God's kingdom on the Cross, in our hearts, and in any suffering we endure for the Lord.

*R&D Have you ever been snubbed or laughed at when you expressed your faith? If not, are you aware of the suffering of your brothers and sisters in Christ in other parts of the world?*

*Prayer: Almighty God, who gave to Your servant martyrs boldness to confess the Name of our Savior Jesus Christ before the rulers of this world and courage to die for the faith: Grant that we may always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within us, and to suffer gladly for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose holy Name we pray.*

## Lesson 21

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**Read: Matthew 5:10-12; Acts 14:19-23; 1 John 3:11-16**

### Unity with God

Eugene Peterson, in his masterful paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, expresses these last two Beatitudes as: “Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble” (vv.10-12).

His wording brings home the identity of the suffering disciple with the crucified Lord and Savior. And that identification is the reward of these Beatitudes. We are most one with the Suffering Servant Jesus when we experience rejection by others because of our faith. Those who reject us as Christians are really rejecting Christ. Our glad reward, and that of anyone who has undergone discrimination or worse because of faith in Jesus, is such closeness with the Lord that we are assured of his kingdom presence, power, and rule in our lives. We are most one with God when we are scorned, kicked out (or worse) because of our faith.

Many of our brothers and sisters around the globe do suffer worse—much worse. There is such an apparent effort on the part of militant Islamic jihadists to eradicate Christianity in Africa and Asia that we could call it “spiritual genocide.” We need to have, in our regular intercessions, prayer for our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world who face martyrdom in our day.

*R&D Do some research on the current persecution of Christians in Africa and Asia. Select one country or area for which you will pray daily and faithfully.*

*Prayer: Almighty God, by whose grace and power Your holy martyrs triumphed over suffering and were faithful even to death: Grant us, who now remember them in thanksgiving, to be so faithful in our witness to You in this world, that we may receive with him the crown of life; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

## Lesson 22

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**Read: Matthew 5:10-12; Hebrews 10:30-39; Romans 5:1-5**

### Reward Is Coming

Martin Luther considered suffering as one of the marks of the true Church. It is true that when the Church has enjoyed prestige, power, and comforts that it usually decays morally and spiritually. In our time, the churches in the democratic West are increasingly under pressure and marginalization due to aggressive secularism and political correctness. Yet, at the same time, we may be entering a time of more authentic faith and discipleship.

Wherever Christians are persecuted, Jesus has promised his reward in heaven. While modern Christianity has tended to downplay preaching about heaven, it remains a powerful reality and essential part of the Gospel of God. John Stott wrote, “We may lose everything on earth, but we shall inherit everything in heaven—not as a reward for merit, however, because the ‘promise is free’ (Acts 5:41)...But the major reason why we should rejoice, is because we are suffering, he said, ‘on my account’ (Matthew 5:11), on account of our loyalty to him and to his standards of truth and righteousness.” And A. M. Hunter points out the essential understanding that “reward is a gift of God’s grace (Romans 4:4)...the reward promised which incidentally, is the same for all, is the Kingdom of God—God’s saving presence and fellowship, here and hereafter.”

Therefore, it is crucial to understanding the good news of the Cross and following Jesus in the way of it to recover, pray, preach and rejoice in the promise of the perfect joy of God's reward in heaven.

*R&D How have you understand God's promise of heaven? Do you give thanks for this comforting word?*

*Prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, who kindled the flame of Your love in the hearts of Your holy martyrs: Grant to us, Your humble servants, a like faith and power of love, that we who rejoice in their triumph may profit by their example, through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

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### Lesson 23

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**Read: Matthew 5:10-12, 20:1-16**

#### The Joy of Heaven

We look at the reward of heaven for one more day because it is so significant and powerful for our lives as Jesus' disciples. Some of us may be afraid that desiring, praying for, and talking about the glory of heaven is a distraction from the work of love here and now, and that it may sound "mercenary." What we have to keep in mind is that we taste the goodness of the Lord now by faith and faithful ministry to him. Whether that delicious foretaste of what is to come is given us in Holy Communion, in Bible study, or prayer, it is a real gift and one to be cherished.

C. S. Lewis had a clear and sensible argument that "there are rewards and rewards" we would do well to remember: "There is the reward which has no natural connexion with the things you do to earn it, and is quite foreign to the desires that ought to accompany these things. Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not mercenary for desiring it. A general who fights well in order to get a peerage is mercenary; a general who fights for victory is not, victory being the proper reward of battle as marriage is the proper reward of love. The rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation."

Therefore, we are to rejoice in the assurance of heaven for the faithful disciple—heaven is the wonderful complete fellowship with the Giver of all good things.

*R&D Reflect on this Scripture promise: "I know that my Redeemer liveth (Job 19:25)...and though this body be destroyed, yet shall I see God; whom I shall see for myself and mine eyes shall behold, and not as a stranger."*

*Prayer: O God whose mercies cannot be numbered: Accept our prayers on behalf of all Thy servants departed this life, and grant them an entrance into the land of light and joy, in the fellowship of Thy saints; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

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### Lesson 24

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**Read: Matthew 25:31-46**

#### The Power of Holy Curses

As we draw to a close our study of the Beatitudes, it would be helpful to look at the contrasting reality in the Scriptures—curses. This is a subject about which most of us feel great discomfort. Nevertheless, a curse is the very real opposite of a blessing. It is at the very end of the

spectrum from God's *shalom*—peace, happiness, and holiness in Him. If you want to review the power of curse, then read Deuteronomy 27 and 28. It will be shocking, but it describes a reality of judgment by the King who was born in Bethlehem and who will return. We need remember that the same Jesus who gave us the Beatitudes also pronounced parallel “woes” upon the proud, hypocritical, and destructive scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 11:21, 18:7, 23:23) and that Jesus himself was under the curse of “hanging on a tree” (Deuteronomy 21:21-23) in crucifixion (one of the most cruel punishments for a faithful Jew).

Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross for us included taking upon himself the curse of our sin. This is an essential part of his victory in the atonement for us that we claim by faith and baptism. In his surrender unto death, Jesus freed us to enjoy the blessing of his kingdom, both now and forever. We are free to be one with God the Holy Trinity through the saving priesthood of our Redeemer and Lord.

God's judgment is real and it comes upon the unrepentant sinner in the form of the kind of spiritual suffering which is inevitable (no matter how much our culture denies and ignores it) for anyone separated from the Living God. That's why God's blessings are so very important and powerful.

*R&D Read some of the “imprecatory” psalms that have curses, such as 54, 69, and 109, and remember that these are the prayers of Christ and members of his body and are judgment upon our own disobedience, sin, and rebellion. They remind us of the need for continual repentance and amendment of life.*

*Prayer: Merciful God, who sent Your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer.*

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## Lesson 25

**Read: Matthew 5:1-14; Isaiah 49:5-10**

### **The Influence of the Blessed**

The Beatitudes show us our Lord Jesus' blueprint for the Christian life. As we follow him in discipleship, we are formed into his identity, his image—we imitate him more and more. It's rather like a rotary engine—a cycle of energy points that as we circle round we gain more and more grace, even while needing to ever renew the starting point and the ensuing developments that open up to us more depths of fellowship with him.

The basic three stages that we keep repeating are: 1) acceptance in God's mercy through the Cross (justification); 2) empowering to love as He loves us that strengthen us to do what He did (sanctification); and 3) repeatedly in this life and supremely and completely in the next, we enjoy the reward of His presence (glorification)—all the work of grace by the power of the Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus. The goal is maturity in Him (“perfect” in His words), available and ready to serve Him at all times. In the Beatitudes we have the unity of grace—the splendid array of evangelical, catholic, and charismatic power from the Lord.

Finally, we consider the effect of our growth in grace—the power of God's blessing in our lives. Jesus was born and died so that we might be his agents, his ambassadors in the world, shedding his truth and light. We are called to influence our world through the people around us so that they see and hear the Gospel of God in Jesus. Our saltiness is purely from God and our light is not



obscured by worldly concerns but free to shine with the light of Christ. The world dreams of power and riches, but the counter-cultural disciples of Jesus are the colonists of the Kingdom of God.

R&D Consider what *“The Message”* says: *“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and His rule.”*

Prayer: *Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first suffered pain and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

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