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Presentation Transcript
The Beatitudes
July 29, 2010

Today we're doing a series on *The Beatitudes*. And this is the introduction to that series. So, today, we'll be answering the question, "What *are* the beatitudes?" I suppose the first thing to do to answer that question would be to read them. So you can find them in Matthew, the 5th chapter, beginning in verse 3. Here they are:

Mt. 5:3 – *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. And blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.*

The first time I ever read the Bible, I was in high school. I was a senior. It was sometime after the first of the year, so it was my second semester. I was probably eighteen by the time I hit the beatitudes. I think my first response to this passage was to read over it, because I don't remember it. I remember Jesus said that we should be the light of the world, and that we're the salt of the earth. I mean, He uses language there that just helps you remember what He's talking about. I remember the thing about "eye for an eye" and loving our enemies. But I didn't remember the beatitudes. I think it's because they are somewhat – I wouldn't say obscure – but they are more abstract than the language that He uses for the rest of the chapter. And as I read the Sermon on the Mount, it did seem to me to be really important, but – I'm just guessing at what I possibly thought about it – maybe I thought that these seven attitudes was just something He was warming up with before He got to the good stuff.

Well, I've since revised my pre-freshman thinking on that. When we study the Bible, it's hard. After growing up on a diet of comic books, *Mad Magazine*, and sci-fi novels, reading the Bible was the most challenging thing I'd ever done in my life. It's been written by many people, who lived thousands of years apart, in some cases, and who lived thousands of years ago, for sure, who all spoke languages that are different from mine, who used many, many, many idioms with which I was *utterly* unfamiliar, who came from cultures vastly different from mine. And then it was translated by a bunch of

monks in – I guess they were monks – in 1611. And I didn't even understand their English that well – a book that spans four thousand years of human history – since creation. It was so intimidating that it was more easy to gloss over what I didn't understand and to focus on more concrete material – sort of a tendency of human nature that we have, isn't it? We go away from what's hard and we go toward what's easier.

I was talking to a client some time ago who had lost his wife. He mentioned her name and, as I always do when he mentions her name, I asked him if he wanted to talk about her. He said he did and he started in talking. But not very far into the discussion, he was talking about a pickup truck that he owned. I sort of observed out loud that it's a lot easier to talk about a car than it is to feel all the feelings that come along with losing his wife. He looked rather startled and then he agreed with me and got back on track. See, he hadn't even realized that he had detoured. He just went away from what's hard and went toward something easier. It's natural for us to do that.

So when we're confronted by passages like the beatitudes – where, at best, we only have the vaguest idea of what He's talking about, and certainly *no* idea of what they might look like if we put them on and had those attitudes ourselves.... Even the thought of these characteristics that He mentions here are foreign. They infer *change*, because they're not what we are. And we all hate that, so let's just move rapidly on to something else. There is something, though, that causes us to stop and take a longer look. And I'd like to mention that to you. It's found in Hebrews 4, verse 12. It says:

Heb. 4:12 – *For the word of God is living and active. It's sharper than any double-edged sword. It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him, to whom we must give account.*

Now, the Bible – on one level – is a story about us and God's efforts to draw us all into relationship with Him – after that relationship was lost in the beginning. But it's so much *more* than that! It is the mind of God in print – at least, the part of His mind that He wants us to know about right now. So it's His revelation to us. He says it's alive! That means it fits *every* age, *every* language, *every* culture and *every* person of every language and every culture. It never grows old. It never gets out of date.

I look back at some of the sermon notes I gave when I first started preaching and I just kind of shutter to think that people had to sit and listen to those. I shutter to think about some of the ones they listen to now, but at least the ones I give now aren't as out of date as those were. But, as things grow old that *we* create, they become outdated and don't fit anymore. But the book that *God* has written doesn't do that. It always is applicable – relevant – because it's alive. Even when we're too lazy to study it, or when we get kind of stuck on ourselves and think we already know and don't need to read it anymore, in spite of reading it...how many times have you read the Bible? Even if we've read it ten times, we haven't really scratched the surface of it – though we might sit down and study it over and over again. It's like that man I heard about that read the Psalms every day for

two years. He read a chapter every day for two years. I don't mean Psalms. I mean Proverbs. Sorry. There are thirty proverbs – thirty one. He read one chapter a day for two years. So he read it twenty-four times – right? – and still was learning more as he read more. So, in spite of that, there's always more to learn. It's infinitely deep. If we want to understand God, and we want to understand His plan, and we want to understand ourselves, and we want to understand why the people around us do what they do, if we want to understand how to live a good life, we need not gloss over, but *delve into* the Word of God. There is that song, *Thy Word is q lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.* (Psalms 119:105) That's what the Bible is.

Could you write a book that would show all the people of every age and every language and every culture how to live a good life? Well, you could if you plagiarized the Bible, but other than that, you'd just be blowing smoke, as would I. So there's something about this book that is way beyond human capacity.

My offering to the church – in doing this series – is with the hope that it will strengthen us in our character, so that we'll be more social, and more loving, and care more about the children in our midst in the Church of God, because this is a child advocacy ministry.

So what *are* the beatitudes? That's the question. We read them, but what did we read? Let's back up a little and let's read the context. Let's go back to Matthew 4, and start in verse 23. We read here:

Mt. 4:23 – *Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about Him spread all over Samaria. People brought to Him all who were ill with various diseases – those suffering severe pain, the demon possessed, those having seizures and the paralyzed – and He healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed Him.*

So that's kind of the background of what's going on just before He says what He's going to say next. He's in a place where people are really starting to take notice of Him. And He's starting to do *powerful* miracles. It says in verse 1, of chapter 5:

Mt. 5:1 – *When He saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down, and His disciples came to Him.*

So this was a private discourse to His disciples. So the ministry is starting to expand. The disciples are able – at this point, probably – to get a glimpse of what might lie ahead. So it's time to talk to them about how to take on the daunting task of leading the church and how to be personally successful in that calling that God is giving them. So this is some of the *living* stuff that applies to each one of us – no exceptions – not just the warm-up, but the *foundation*. These principles that He's talking about here, actually undergird everything else not immediately apparent. For example, when Jesus tells us – in a few verses down in chapter 5 – that we should love our enemies, we *know* what that means, but we don't naturally know *how* to do that. But once we look into the beatitudes, then it

becomes a lot more clear to us – how to go about doing that – to avoid adultery, to love enemies, to avoid murdering somebody, to be the light of the world. We have to put on these character illogical elements that are the beatitudes. They are the key to this whole business of the successfully lived Christian life and entrance into the Kingdom of God.

Now, having said that, this might sound to some folks like I think we have to *work* our way into the kingdom by our own efforts – that it can be earned – but once you start looking into the beatitudes, we quickly see that isn't true at all.

So, first of all, we look at the context of what we see there. And we see that they are not just something to get people started, but fundamental principles that have to do with character. They are attitudes. They are a way of thinking – or being – in the world.

There are seven attitudes. That's the next thing I wanted to mention. The word *beatitude*, actually, is not a biblical word. That's a word that was added to describe these seven attitudes. It was added by people. If you think of them as any sentence in the passage that starts with "Blessed are," then there are nine of them. And if you just focus on the attitudes themselves, then there are seven. There's not eight or nine. We looked up the beatitudes in Nave's *Topical Bible* and it directs us to a topic called *Graces*. They are referring to the word *blessed*. When it says, "Blessed are..." it means, "Happy are you if..." So Jesus said that nine times. But there are actually seven sentences that say, "Blessed are...those that are peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God..." And then in verse 10, He says:

V-10 – *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Well, that's not an attitude, is it? You'll be happy if you have that approach, but it's not an attitude.

V-11 – *Blessed are you when people insult you – verse 11 – and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

So "rejoice and be glad" when persecuted *is* an attitude, isn't it? But not in the same way as the previous seven. He's diverged from His pattern by this time. His pattern in the beginning was a simple statement about an attitude, and then a reward is attached to it. And He's kind of moved away from that a little bit. So, I think this comment, about being persecuted, is actually a transitional statement about what comes afterwards. If you do these seven things, you can expect to be persecuted, but that's okay. Just go ahead and know that you are in good company as you set about to shine as the light of the world. That's kind of what I think He was saying. That actually *is* just what He said, isn't it? I just paraphrased it slightly.

Okay, so are there nine or are there seven? Well, you can look at it and see if you think I'm right or not. That's my opinion. Different people think about it different ways. You get to decide.

So, attitudes – ways of thinking – not behavior. *Thou shalt keep the Sabbath day holy.* Right? That's a *behavior* God wants us to engage in. Right? That's one of the Ten Commandments. I know an attitude grows out of that over time, but the commandments are all expressed as behaviors. By contrast, these are *attitudes* that we're to put on. That was the letter, and then we move on into the New Testament and we talk about the Spirit more. These attitudes are to become us as much as any behavior we might put on. Blessed and happy are we if we put them on. They are the attitudes of God. And they are the ones He wants His church leadership and all of us to focus on. They are all kingdom-skill attitudes that we have to have if we're going to be a part of the Kingdom of God. Is that important? That's not just warm-up stuff there, is it? That's fundamental stuff.

I also believe that...well, I'll just read you a scripture first and then I'll tell you what I believe. Let's go to Mark 4, verse 26.

Mk. 4:26 – *This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. We still don't know how. Nobody's been able to create a seed and make it sprout. All by itself, the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, and then the full kernel in the head.*

One after the other, it grows in stages. We also know that people develop in stages, as well. We even have a series, actually, that shows how to work with children in their various developmental stages to teach them the things that they're ready to learn at that stage in their development. I took it beyond that to talk about the different stages of adulthood, as well, that God has designed into us. So that presentation set was based on human development and the Word of God together. If you want to see it, you can go to our Website and order *Spiritual Growth and Human Development* – the series.

So what I'm saying is that God causes things to grow in stages. He causes plants to grow in stages. He causes animals to grow in stages. There's an egg, and then there's a pollywog, and then there's a frog. Right? There's a worm, and then there's a chrysalis, and then there's a butterfly – grows in stages. People develop in stages, as well. So, do I need to belabor that anymore? Are we all on the same page with that? Wouldn't it also be interesting if God caused *us* to develop spiritually in stages, as well? In fact, there's a man, named John Stotts, who wrote a book about the first four beatitudes, and said that very thing. He said, "They are stages of spiritual development." First, we must be poor in spirit. If we get that, then that leads to the next level, which is mourning, and so on. So they are like rungs of a ladder. And you have to climb up the first rung before you can go to the second – they're developmental stages. And we have to accomplish the tasks of the stage before we're ready to move on to the next one, so that we can be *equipped* to learn what we need to learn at the next stage.

So I believe that He's right about that. But not just the first four, but all seven of them. I believe they are all seven progressive stages. I believe I can see a progression there. I believe that each one is the foundation for the one before it, and without that foundation, you can't go to the next level.

In my work, I run into people all the time that have suffered developmental arrest. They're stuck at certain levels of maturity because they didn't get to do the work there – usually impeded by well-meaning parents, siblings, teachers, bullies, whatever. When we run into people like that, they look like adults, but actually they're still thinking at a different level of maturity than they would appear to be, because they suffered a developmental arrest. So my job is to re-parent them and help them mature their way out of those developmental arrests and do the work that they didn't get to do. So it just makes so much sense to me, then, that there is a progression in spiritual growth, too.

I ran into a teager awhile back who never learned how to do what he should have learned when he was in elementary school, which is to be productive and cooperative. Everybody knows that most elementary-aged kids are like that. The ones that aren't are the ones headed for trouble later because they haven't learned that yet. So, when we encounter a teenager who has never learned to do those things, before he or she can advance, the earlier work has to be done. And they can do it as teenagers, it's just so much harder for them. That's what happens to all of us. There's a time when we can easily and naturally learn the things that we're supposed to learn at that level, and if we miss it and have to go back and do it later, it's like pulling teeth to make that happen. There is, however, we're learning, a second shot at almost all of those human developmental things. There's a brief period of time in each level where things from the past can be learned.

So why would this be important if this really is true – that the beatitudes are a progression of spiritual development? Well, let's suppose for a bit that you – now I know this is not true, but let's just suppose it is – that it seems to you that all the people around you are always causing you trouble. They are mean to you. They always want to argue with you and fight with you. They always blow you off. They are always turning away from you and being disrespectful to you. What do you think the problem might be? Do you think it is all of *them*? Or do you think, maybe, it's *you*? Well, as long as it's not us, we can clearly see that it's the person that's having the problem with everybody. Right? So, if it happens a lot, it might be that we're turning people off, and frustrating them, and angering them, and causing them not to want to be around us. So what would we want to do to be more at peace with other people? That question can be asked this way. How can I be a peacemaker? Right? And that is the last beatitude, isn't it? So, if you believe that the beatitudes are a progression, and that each one is a stage of spiritual development – and it's a blueprint for kingdom-skill development – then you might begin looking back down the stages to see what you might have missed earlier in your spiritual development. It's easy to track back and see what was missed. It's not hard to see where the developmental arrest might have taken place. Once we understand that, then it's easier to put it in place and possible to go on.

So, if you were about to think about that characteristic as absent, where would we look for the solution? By the way, as we go through each of these attitudes – and that *is* what we’re going to do in this series – we’ll see how they fit together and form a foundation for the next phase. I’m asking this question today not to answer it, but just to get you ready to hear the answer later.

Okay, so if that’s true then, what the beatitudes really are at base is a spiritual growth plan. Now you can flounder along in your spiritual development, and find out that you’re not a peacemaker, and have to backtrack, but wouldn’t it be better to start at the other end and plan to be poor in spirit, and then plan to mourn, and plan like that? Of course it would.

When I was going through school, I encountered a book. It was called *Development Through the Life Span*. It’s about psycho-social development. It’s all about how humans develop in stages. It’s really about how God has set that in us – to develop that way. That was, personally, the most helpful book that I have read of all the books I’ve read. It was helpful to think about how I had come through stages from childhood to my present adult state, and also to see where I might not have accomplished the tasks as well as I might have, and to go back and rework some of those things in my own life, and also helpful to see what I was supposed to be working on *now* at my age, instead of just putting one foot in front of another day after day after day, and trudging along down the road of life – but to have some kind of purposeful approach to it. So that was very helpful to me – just to think about my own physical, social and psychological development.

But when I think of the beatitudes as stages of growth, I find that they come alive – just like Paul said about the Bible. And they become meaningful in a personal way and not something that you just gloss over because you don’t understand them. So now they’re talking to me about my journey through life with God and what’s going to happen later.

Now, before I wrap up, I want to mention one more thing that I believe. We do know that God not only causes things to develop in stages, but He wraps meaning into meaning, doesn’t He? He just folds things together so that everything has multiple connecting points. Everything is used for more than one thing, it seems like. Our mouths don’t just talk, they don’t just eat, they don’t just breathe. They do all three. There is multi-functionality in most every part of the human body. And we know that the Sabbath isn’t just a day of rest, don’t we? It’s also a picture of the Kingdom of God. Paul called the Sabbath a rest, and he was relating it to what’s going to happen later. We know that the Old Testament isn’t just a story of God’s dealings with Israel, but the whole thing is a metaphor – it’s a picture – of Jesus Christ’s relationship with the church. Israel went through the Red Sea, and Paul said that was their baptism. We know the biblical festivals are not just Israelitish harvest festivals, but each one is a stage of spiritual development leading the entire creation to the Kingdom of God, don’t we? Passover first and then right on through.

Well, once I learned that the beatitudes were stages, I wondered, since there were seven of them, if they were in any way connected with the meaning of the biblical festivals.

And you know what? I think they *are*. So, as we go through these beatitudes, we're also going to think of them in relationship to the holy days. My friend, Ron Dart, says the holy days are each an appointment with God. So we can see, by looking at them, that these appointments each mark a developmental advance in God's salvation plan. So I'm going to examine the beatitudes, as we're going through them, to see if they also might be connected in some way to these holy days.

What would that mean if that were true? Well, for those who observe and, consequently, understand the meaning of the festivals, it might mean that they also point to our participation in God's plan and show us what we're supposed to be working on in our own lives to be a part of it. It's all folded together. So that's somewhat of an ambitious plan, but we have time, and so we believe we can get through that.

What if – after you hear me expound all of these seven beatitudes – you don't agree that they are stages, or you don't agree that they connect to the holy days? Would you hurt my feelings? No. Would you be better off or worse off for having to think about it? Well, you'd be better off in any event, wouldn't you? You'd be more firmly grounded in what you believe because of the exercise. So either way, it never hurts to think about God's Word. It's going to be good for you to stretch your mind, and wrap it around something new, and test to see if it's true. So, on the holy day – the first holy day – we'll begin our series, then, on the beatitudes with how important it is to be poor in spirit.