Beginning the Beatitudes
Matthew 5:1-5
(The following text is taken from a sermon preached by Gil Rugh in 1983)

1. The Sermon on the Mount
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The closing verses of Matthew 4 tell of Jesus calling four of His disciples to serve with Him in
His ministry. In the last study Jesus’ ministry was described as involving teaching, proclaiming
and healing.

This teaching referred to the more detailed unfolding of the significance of the Old Testament
Scriptures as they applied to Jesus. His activity of proclaiming had to do with announcing the
presence of the kingdom of God in the person of the Messiah. The healing ministry of Christ
served to reveal and prove Christ to be the Messiah.

The healing that occurred through the ministry of Christ and His apostles and disciples validated
His claim to be the Messiah of Israel. By healing individuals of various afflictions, Christ
fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament that indicated that the Messiah would heal the
afflictions of people. The final realization of this will occur during the Millennium, the earthly
kingdom during which Jesus Christ will rule the earth. In that kingdom there will be no sickness
or disease. Throughout Matthew's Gospel, we will consider more about the healing ministry of
Christ.

1. The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew begins recording Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in chapter 5 and continues the message
through chapter 7. This is the same basic sermon which Luke records in chapter 6 of his
Gospel, verses 17 through 49. However, Matthew records the most complete account of that
sermon.

Much discussion revolving around the Sermon on the Mount involves all kinds of use and
misuse of the sermon. Some try to use the Sermon on the Mount as a means of salvation saying
that by keeping its teachings, we can be accepted by God. Such an approach cannot be the
intention of the Sermon on the Mount.

As is always the case in determining the meaning of a particular portion of Scripture, you must
start by considering its context. The context of the Sermon on the Mount is foundational in
determining its significance.
Jesus Christ had just begun His public ministry as Matthew recorded it. Matthew placed the sermon in this position in his Gospel because it fit his purpose to do so. Matthew will record much material later in his Gospel that occurred before this sermon was delivered. But he recorded the sermon at this point in Christ's ministry because it is crucial to understanding the public ministry of Christ.

His public ministry centered around a significant statement in Matthew 4:17: "From that time Jesus began to preach and say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" Jesus was announcing the presence of the prophesied kingdom for Israel in the person of the Messiah. The public ministry of Christ revolved around announcing the kingdom promised to Israel in the Old Testament. Christ had been performing miracles of healing which demonstrated Him to be the Messiah of the Old Testament. So as chapter 5 begins, the Sermon on the Mount must be interpreted in the context of the ministry of Christ announcing the kingdom to Israel. It is given in the context of the kingdom prophesied in the Old Testament over which Jesus Christ will rule as king.

2. The Church is Not in View

The kingdom aspect of the Sermon on the Mount is significant because the Church is not in view at all in this passage. In fact, the Church is not even mentioned until Matthew 16. If Jesus had been talking about the Church in Matthew 5, no one would have had any idea what He was talking about. If He had been talking about the Church, His disciples, the group to whom He began addressing the Sermon on the Mount, would not have had the foggiest notion of what was on His mind. His teaching of this would have been an unintelligible jumble. So to take the Sermon on the Mount and say it is addressed to the Church is to destroy the whole context of the Book of Matthew. The Church is not even in view. The disciples will not grasp the Church and its significance when it is first mentioned in chapter 16.

The Sermon on the Mount is not complicated. It is a presentation of the character and conduct of those who will be part of the kingdom that Jesus Christ is going to establish.

In the third chapter of John's Gospel is the familiar account of Nicodemus, a religious leader of the Jews, who came to talk to Jesus. Nicodemus acknowledged Him to be a great teacher from God. "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Truly, Truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God'" (John 3:3). In this verse Jesus announces to Nicodemus the requirements for being part of the kingdom that He is going to establish. He told Nicodemus that if a person is going to be part of the kingdom that He is setting up, it is necessary for the person to be born again.

Matthew is covering the same material in chapters 5 through 7 of his Gospel -- you must be born again. He is describing the characteristics of a person who has been born again and who will thus be a part of His kingdom.

In light of that concept, the Sermon on the Mount is very applicable today to the Church, to those who have believed in Jesus Christ and have been born again. Believers in Jesus Christ "have been born again . . . through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23). So, even though the Sermon on the Mount is given to Jews in anticipation of a coming earthly kingdom, it describes the present character and conduct of those who have been born again and
are, thus, going to enter that kingdom.

The character of God is unchanging. Therefore, all those from all time who have come to believe in Jesus Christ and have experienced the new birth will manifest the character of God. The Sermon on the Mount is a description of the character of believers today as well as the character of believing Jews in Jesus' day to whom He was addressing this information regarding the kingdom. Therefore, the Sermon on the Mount is directly applicable to the Church today. It is a description of those who are truly the children of God. It is not telling you how to become a child of God, but it is describing those who are the children of God.

Christ will speak to the matter of being born again, not using that expression, but as acquiring God's righteousness. By virtue of the fact that He is speaking of the coming kingdom, certain material will be limited to the future in anticipation of the kingdom. Promises will be given in light of that kingdom having to do with the yet future literal earthly kingdom. Such promises are not directed to the Church in its function today, but the character and conduct of believers is unchanging. Therefore, the Sermon on the Mount will present a clear revelation of what we should be like.

The concern of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount is to present true righteousness in contrast to self-righteousness and the false righteousness of the religious leaders of His day. He summarized well what He is saying in Matthew 5:20: "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." Christ is addressing the issue of who is going into the kingdom. Unless you have righteousness greater than the scribes and Pharisees, you will not get into the kingdom. Jesus is referring to the earthly kingdom that He will establish, with direct application to the Jews in anticipation of that kingdom. But the point is still the same for all of us regarding righteousness and acceptability before God. Our own righteousness is not adequate to make us acceptable.

3. The Beatitudes

Matthew begins recording the Sermon on the Mount by giving the description of the circumstances surrounding it: "And when He saw the multitudes, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. And opening His mouth He began to teach them" (Matt. 5:1,2). Christ withdrew to a mountain, evidently in the region of Capernaum, and the disciples He had called came with Him. During the course of the discussion, others evidently joined the group because by chapter 7, the crowds have gathered around Him again. Some of the material in chapter 7 is addressed especially to the unbelieving multitudes. But as Jesus begins the sermon, it is addressed specifically to His disciples.

The first part of the sermon is referred to as the Beatitudes, a word coming from the Latin word for blessing. The first word of each verse in verses 3-11 is "blessed." This section known as the Beatitudes could also be referred to as the Blessings. The word translated "blessed" (makarios) means happy. One commentator translated the word as "spiritually prosperous." This word does not indicate that something is being promised to someone, but rather describes the condition of the person. The word indicates that such a person is happy, not taking the word in the light, frivolous sense we often use it.

To be blessed or spiritually prosperous describes those who are in right relationship with God.
"And opening his mouth He began to teach them, saying, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'" (Matt. 5:2,3). One commentator noted that the word "blessed" almost becomes synonymous with "saved". It describes the spiritual prosperity, happiness and joy that are the possession of those who are the saved of God and, thus, characterize the conduct of the believer. Psalm 1 pronounces the blessing upon a certain person whose conduct is demonstrative of his character. "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night" (Ps. 1:1,2). This indicates that such a person is blessed and his conduct reveals his character as one who is happy or spiritually prosperous. Such a one lives his life differently from others in the world and focuses his life on God and his Word. Such is the person Jesus is talking about in Matthew 5.

4. The Poor in Spirit

Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3). In the last phrase, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," He is referring to the earthly kingdom that the Jews so eagerly anticipated and longed for, the kingdom over which He would rule. Earlier Jesus said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17).

To whom does He say the kingdom belongs? The poor in spirit. Be careful with that phrase! The verse does not say, "Blessed are the poor." It says nothing about poverty in the realm of material possessions. Jesus is not putting a premium on material poverty. He is talking about poverty of spirit -- those who are poor in spirit and who are aware of their condition.

The word which is translated "poor" denotes absolute destitution. Those who are poor in spirit are aware that, spiritually, they have nothing. They are aware of their fallen, worthless, hopeless spiritual condition. Spiritual poverty is the condition to which this word refers. Blessing is pronounced on those who recognize that they are spiritually destitute, in other words, that they are sinners and that they see themselves as being without hope, apart from God. Such an understanding is foundational as a starting point with God.

One of the hardest things about explaining the Gospel to people is getting them to recognize their spiritual poverty. During the past week I was in a discussion about how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. The Scriptures say that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. The basic issue in this concept is to recognize your spiritual poverty. It is a humbling process to recognize that I am nothing and have nothing acceptable to offer to God. I am spiritually destitute and I must cast myself totally on His mercy. Often the more successful a person is materially, the more difficult it is to bow himself before God and acknowledge his unworthiness.

Jesus gave a parable in Luke 18 describing certain individuals and their understanding or lack of understanding of this concept. "And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: 'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, "God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get"'" (Luke 18:9-12). The Pharisee did not recognize his spiritual poverty;
rather than being poor in spirit, he was proud. He had not recognized that he was a worthless, undeserving sinner. "But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'" (v.13). The tax-gatherer had recognized his total unworthiness and had cast himself upon God's mercy. He could not offer God his righteousness because he realized he had none.

In Matthew 5:3, Jesus is saying that those who are spiritually happy are those who have recognized their spiritually destitute condition. There is no hope of ever being acceptable to God until you first recognize how spiritually destitute you are.

Some people boast, “I'll be all right, I'm doing my best.” Others brag, “I'll be all right. I've been baptized,” or “I'll be all right, I've joined the church.” Some are even more boastful, “I'll be all right. I've done better than most have.” All of these things are totally irrelevant! True blessing is pronounced on those who are poor in spirit, those who have recognized their spiritual poverty and have cast themselves upon the mercy and grace of God for His forgiveness.

In witnessing to unbelievers, it is so important to begin with helping them understand that they are sinners without hope if they have not trusted Jesus Christ as their Savior. If a person has never recognized his hopelessness apart from Christ, he can never be born into God's family. Jesus is saying that those who are spiritually poor are the ones who are blessed.

5. Those Who Mourn

Matthew continues to record Jesus' message in verse 4: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." The word which is translated "mourn" is the strongest word in the Greek language for sorrow. Jesus is referring to those who are overwhelmed with anguish and sorrow.

There is an interesting connection between verses 3 and 4. Those who are spiritually destitute are overwhelmed with the anguish of their sin. When He refers to those who mourn, He is not talking about general sorrow which the whole world experiences, but rather a special sorrow because of the recognition of their spiritual need. There is blessing or spiritual prosperity for those who have come to a sense of anguish and sorrow for their sinfulness. It is these to whom Christ brings comfort. They shall be comforted by the One who Himself is the Comforter.

Verse 4 is an important verse for those of us who are grace-oriented believers, concerned about overt shows of emotion. We sometimes get concerned about adding to the gospel by saying you should do something in addition to or other than believe.

The Bible teaches that salvation is by faith alone. A man is justified by faith and not by works of the law. However, here Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (v.4).

In our efforts to make sure that we do not add anything to salvation by faith in Christ alone, we get concerned that people may think we are adding something to salvation. Consequently, some people profess faith in Christ even though they have never come to grips with the awfulness of sin. Sin is wretched; it is ruinous. Sin is rebellion against a holy God, yet we are
concerned that people do not think that they have to be sorry for their sins.

On the other side, we do not want people to think that they have to work up some kind of emotion in order to be saved. But some of the trivial Christianity in the world today is a result of people never having come to grips with the reality of their sin. They have no sense of anguish over the terrible awfulness of their sin. They fail to recognize that it necessitated the death of Jesus Christ on a cross. Sometimes we want people to come to Christ and believe in Him without having come to any sense of the awfulness of sin, and without the anguish and sorrow that comes as a result of recognizing how sinful we really are. When a sinner sees himself as a wretched person and recognizes the awfulness of his sin and understands that he has been guilty of rebellion and rejection of God Himself, that surely ought to cause some anguish and sorrow.

The background for what Christ is saying is found in Isaiah 61, a passage Christ applied to Himself. "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to prisoners; to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to grant those who mourn in Zion, giving them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. So they will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified" (Isa. 61:1-3). This passage describes those who are overwhelmed with their sinfulness when the Messiah comes.

Jeremiah is described as the weeping prophet because he was overwhelmed with the anguish of his own sinfulness and the sinfulness of the people of God. Isaiah spoke of the promise of comfort the Messiah will bring. This is tied inseparably with what Christ says in Matthew 5:4 regarding those who mourn. The Jews would recognize this message in the context of the coming Messiah. Those who have experienced anguish and sorrow over their sin will receive the blessing that only the Messiah can bring.

Sometimes I am greatly disturbed and bothered when I talk to people who profess to be believers. They seem to be without any consciousness of the sinfulness of sin. Can a person really be a believer in Jesus Christ and not have come to grips with the awfulness of sin? Can one be a true believer in Christ and not have been broken in spirit by the realization of how awful sin really is? In light of what Jesus Christ says in Matthew 5:4, I say salvation is impossible apart from the realization of the awfulness of sin.

“Ahah!” you reply, “Gil is distorting the gospel. He is saying you cannot be saved unless you cry.” I did not say that. I said I do not believe a person can truly be born again if he has never come to grips with the awfulness of sin. A true recognition of sin brings sorrow and anguish to the heart. Does not Jesus pronounce blessing, happiness, spiritual prosperity on those who mourn? If a person has never mourned over his sin, can that person be a believer? Jesus said the blessing of salvation is for those who mourn, but we want to give it to those who do not mourn.

When you recognize who Jesus Christ is and place your trust in Him, does that not involve the recognition of your own worthlessness? Don't you have to recognize that none of your own righteousness is good enough to offer to God? When you believe in Jesus Christ, does that not
necessitate recognition of sin as sin and a willingness to cast yourself upon the grace of God for salvation?

We need to be careful that in preaching grace we do not distort the Word of God and the grace of God. It is healthy for people to mourn over their sin.

We should also notice the other contrast as well. Not everyone who mourns or is overwhelmed by sorrow is saved. But those whose sorrow and grief bring them to repentance are saved. Paul says that godly sorrow brings about repentance. "For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Cor. 7:10).

Unbelievers need to mourn -- recognize their sinfulness and unworthiness -- and cast themselves in faith upon the One who is the comforter. Then they will receive His comfort, strength and enabling Power.

6. The Gentle or Meek

Matthew records the third blessing in Matthew 5:5: "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth." We are probably more familiar with the King James translation of this verse: "Blessed are the meek."

This word translated "gentle" or "meek" does not mean what is often associated with meekness -- weak or without a backbone. One commentator said it very well: "Meekness is not to be confused with being wishy-washy, indecisive and timid. Nor should it be confused with mere affability. Some people are naturally nice and easygoing, but so are some dogs." Some people are easygoing; nothing stirs them up. That is not what meekness and gentleness is. To put it very simply, a gentle or meek person is a person who is submissive to God -- the key element is submissiveness.

Aristotle used this word to describe a person who was not out of control, not one who was not able to express anger, but rather to describe one who expressed anger under control.

Those who are born again will manifest the character of God their Father and of Jesus Christ, His Son. As believers, our lives are to manifest the characteristics of Christ.

This particular word which is translated "gentle" is used three other times in the New Testament. Jesus used it to describe Himself in Matthew 11:28,29: "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle [meek] and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls." Jesus indicated that the characteristic of meekness or gentleness is true of Him. He is the One who learned in every situation and all circumstances to submit Himself to the Father.

Does that mean He is never angry? This is the same Jesus who stormed into the temple and drove out the money-changers. This is the Jesus who spoke of the religious leaders of His day as open graves. This is the same gentle Christ referred to in the Book of Revelation where the rulers of the world cried for the rocks and mountains to fall on them to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb. On that occasion His wrath will be poured out in vengeance. Strength is
obviously involved. Sometimes gentleness and meekness are thought of as a lack of strength, but they are better described as power under control. Those who are experiencing the joys of their salvation have been brought under the control of Jesus Christ. They are gentle; they have submitted themselves to Him.

The same word is used again in Matthew 21:5, and here it refers to Christ also: "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold your King is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'" This is the same gentle and meek Christ who will rule the earth. Psalm 2:9,12 says, "Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron, Thou shalt shatter them like earthenware" and "Do homage to the Son, lest He become angry, and you perish in the way." But He is gentle and meek because He is completely submitted to the plan of the Father. He is completely under the control of God. His anger is strong and fierce, but it is directed toward sin and unrighteousness.

The other use of this word in the New Testament is in 1 Peter 3. In this section of Peter's epistle, the word is used in the context of overall submissiveness. Peter is talking about the need for submissiveness in various realms. In chapter 2 he talks about submissiveness to government and about servants being submissive to their masters. In chapter 3 he talks about it in the context of families: "In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands" (v.1). In succeeding verses he speaks of the wife's adornment being internal rather than external, continuing in verse 4, "but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God." Verse 5 concludes by speaking of wives "being submissive to their own husbands." This kind of gentleness is seen in the context of submissiveness. The person of a gentle and quiet spirit is one who has learned to be submissive according to the plan of God -- submissive to government, to civil authority, to those in the home and to those in the church.

Some people are always struggling. They cannot submit to authority. This is a spiritual problem. Those who have submitted themselves to God and to Jesus Christ are spiritually prosperous; gentleness or meekness characterizes them because they have submitted themselves to God.

That means we, as believers, must submit ourselves to God's plan in its entirety. If I say I have submitted myself to Him but am unwilling to submit to you if God has placed you in a position of authority over me, my unwillingness to submit to you becomes a problem of unsubmitiveness to God. That is why it is so important that our lives be arranged according to the Word. We should demonstrate the same meekness and gentleness which characterizes Christ. He was completely submissive to the Father. As He confronted the rulers and leaders of His day, He recognized their position of authority. They were amazed at His quietness and at His conduct as He operated in submission to God in carrying out the will of God.

7. Moses, Gentle and Strong

Numbers 12:3 says that Moses was gentle above all men on the face of the earth. That is amazing because meekness or gentleness is often thought of as weakness, yet God chose a man who was gentle above all men of the earth to lead millions of people out of bondage in Egypt. Would God have chosen a weak person for that job? No. He chose a strong person, but one who was submissive to the will, purpose and plan of God.
The Book of Numbers records rebellion against Moses. His own sister, Miriam, rebelled against his leadership and God struck her with leprosy. That shows something of God's view of resisting authority. The Bible records this man Moses as being gentle above all men on the face of the earth, yet he was appointed to such a great task. Moses had learned submissiveness.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5). These promises are directed toward those who have come into spiritual life through the new birth by faith in Jesus Christ. Such individuals shall inherit the earth. This promise is directed to the Jews in light of the coming kingdom. For those who are poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The gentle shall inherit the earth. These are the ones who shall go into the Millennium, the earthly kingdom that Christ is preaching about.

8. The Sermon Applied

The thrust of Jesus' message is directed toward the kingdom that He is going to establish. The character of the one who is born again does not change. Those who have believed in Jesus Christ will be characterized by being poor in spirit, by mourning over sin and by gentleness of character. They are destined for the presence of God.

We are not anticipating the setting up of the earthly kingdom by Jesus Christ at the present time. We cannot announce that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, because the Messiah is not here. The kingdom over which He will rule and reign is at least seven years away, but we do anticipate His coming at the Rapture to take believers to be with Himself. We anticipate being ushered into the presence of God Himself by none other than Jesus Christ. The Book of Colossians says that Christ will present believers to His Father as those who are holy, without blame and without spot.

The character of those described in Matthew 5 is also to be our character as believers in Jesus Christ. We are to manifest the same qualities Jesus was talking about to His disciples when He delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

How do you measure up? Have you recognized your spiritual poverty and understood that you are without hope apart from God's mercy? Have you recognized your own personal sinfulness? Have you been overwhelmed by how sinful you really are? One thing that stands out to me from the night I was saved was how I was overwhelmed with a sense of my own unworthiness and sinfulness. At that time I was only ten years old and had not had a chance to get involved in anything vile. Yet I knew I was wretchedly sinful, and that was a terrible thing to me!

Cast yourself upon God's mercy that He might provide you with His comfort. This is not simply working up emotions, but rather a real awareness of sin that characterizes those who have recognized God's grace.

Can you be described as one who is gentle and meek? Have you submitted yourself to God? That is what happens in salvation. As you recognize your sinfulness and submit yourself to Him, you allow Him to rule and reign in your life. Have you granted Him that privilege?