

A Good Beginning

July 4, 2021

How many of you ever had to give an oral report in front of the class, like maybe an oral book report. I remember doing a few of those in grade school. I don't think the teacher gave us any instructions on how to give a good talk. In college I took a course where I had to give a short talk to the class. We did receive some instruction. In my seminary preaching class I preached several 10 minute sermons to the class. These were recorded so you could go to the media library and watch yourself preach. We were taught more than how to construct sermons. We were taught about oratory, the art of public speaking.

One of the basics of public speaking concerns your introduction or opening remarks. Your introduction is not meant just to introduce your subject. You also want to grab the attention of your listeners within the first minute. Failing to do so, they may tune you out and not hear any of the rest of what you have to say.

One approach to doing so is to speak about a subject your listeners are already interested in. I'm sure Jesus was aware of that. I doubt Jesus had a formal class in public speaking. But he was highly intelligent, observant, and thoughtful. I am sure he learned much by watching others speak. And some of them may have had some training. The art of oratory was at that time a subject long taught. The ancient Greeks were the first to study the art of public speaking. They developed teaching points to make it better. Israel was ruled by the Greeks for more than 250 years.

So, it is not out of the realm of possibility that Jesus had learned something of how to give a good talk. We are most fortunate to have one of his sermons, or at least a major part of one. We call this the sermon on the mount. It is found in Matthew, chapter five.

Matthew 5:1-2 (NIV) Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them...

In this sermon Jesus made use of the principles of oratory to grab the attention of his listeners.

Matthew 5:1-9 (NIV) Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying, "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.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Now, you might be thinking, “These don’t grab my attention.” Likely, they do not. That is because the phrases Jesus uses are unfamiliar to us. We don’t know what he means by them. The phrase “poor in spirit” only appears in parallel passages in Mark and Luke in the New Testament. And there is no explanation as to what Jesus means by it. The context doesn’t help. But the Jews of that time heard them with interest.

Jesus did not speak new words or phrases in His sermon introduction. He said things that were familiar to those Jews who were awaiting the restoration of Israel. He introduces His sermon by echoing the promises of God concerning Israel. They had heard them many times before.

I want to share with you examples of this for the first two beatitudes.

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

The idea of someone being poor in spirit was familiar to them. Look at the following three passages.

Proverbs 29:23 (NIV) A man's pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honor.

Isaiah 57:15 (NIV) For this is what the high and lofty One says-- he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.

Isaiah 66:2 (NIV) This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.

These last two passages are from a part of the book of Isaiah that foretold a time of future blessings upon God’s people. Following an exile God would restore the nation’s previous prosperity.

Now for the second example from Jesus’ introduction.

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

In the last year we have grieved the loss of people and things. But Jesus is referring to a specific subject of grief. Read with me the promises of God that this echoes.

Isaiah 61:1-3 (NIV) The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion-- to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

Isaiah 66:10 (NIV) Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice greatly with her, all you who mourn over her.

The thought here is of those who mourn over the sad state of Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem. Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians. Later, after Isaiah's time, Judah was conquered by the Babylonians and then ruled by them, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans at the time Jesus lived. It was a sorry state of affairs for the Jews. And they mourned their loss of independence.

We know what that is like. Even as we celebrate our Independence Day, we mourn the many problems in our country. We mourn the sad state of politics in our national government. We have mourned over the state of our church. We would like to see both church and nation renewed by the power of God.

For those who were mourning the sad state of Israel at that time, these were words of hope. Jesus was echoing these ancient promises when he spoke these beatitudes to the crowd.

Now, I want to depart a moment from Jesus' sermon for an application. **Whenever you come across a puzzling word or phrase in the Bible, see if it appears elsewhere in the Bible. This is where chain reference, cross reference, and concordance tools are helpful.**

Let me give you an example you may be more familiar with. In Ephesians 6 we read the following.

Ephesians 6:14-15, 16, 17 (NIV) Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace...

In addition... Take the helmet of salvation...

I can't tell you how many commentaries I have read of Paul's use of battle armor in Ephesians 6 that make no mention of the fact that similar phrasing is found in the OT, in the book of Isaiah. It was not original with Paul. Nor was it originally describing a Roman soldier.

Isaiah 59:17 (NIV) He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.

Let us now apply Jesus' beatitudes to ourselves as Christians.

The poor in spirit acknowledge to God their spiritual poverty. Thinking about how little we have lived for God's glory leaves us feeling poor in spirit.

We all need to acknowledge our spiritual poverty. We live most of our lives for ourselves, our glory, our comfort, our safety, our needs. We give very little of ourselves to God's glory.

The mourning God wants from us is deep grief for what our sin does to God. We do not mourn our own sad sinful state like Jesus does. Do you really think you take your sins as seriously as God does?

The meek person bridles his or her ego, passions, prejudices, and desires before God and others. The word meek in our culture is not the best word since it carries the idea of weakness. Unfortunately, there is no one English word that adequately translates the Greek word *praus*. The Greek word is about strength that is fully under control.

Those hungry for righteousness desire a right relationship with God.

There are many who believe in the existence of a god who do not care at all about having a right relationship with god. They do not want to know their creator. The poor in spirit are the ones most likely to desire this righteousness.

The merciful treat others as they wish to be treated.

They do not look down on others. That means the color, ethnicity, background, interests, habits, and sins of the other person do not determine how you treat them.

The pure in heart have achieved holiness. Such people have pure motives, fully serving God's purposes. Not a one of us can say that about ourselves or anyone else we know.

The peacemakers pursue peace/reconciliation to every other person. In this, they are acting like God, for God does the same.

Seeing what Jesus describes, we know we all fall far, far short of these things. And so...

The beatitudes convict us. They rebuke us. They challenge us.

We are way to prideful to be classed as poor in spirit. We do not mourn our sin like Jesus does. We are not merciful to all, but only those we like, or those like us. We are not peacemakers.

The beatitudes rebuke us and call us to examine ourselves for sin. In fact, the whole sermon does. It points to sin beyond where we have looked before. It calls us to look at ourselves more deeply than we have in the past.

While he ended each with a wonderful promise, He leaves us knowing we will never deserve such blessings. Jesus' introduction grabbed their attention for the hard words to follow. We will look at those next week. Overall, his sermon did not leave them feeling comfortable.

As you read it, expect mixed feelings. Expect him to rebuke sin in you. Examine yourself for the sins he spoke of. But do so knowing that the blessings he speaks of are yours as a gift of God's grace in Christ Jesus. You too can know God's forgiveness.

As we begin this study of the sermon on the mount I encourage you to read the whole sermon at one sitting. Try to get a feeling for an overall message or tone. Then start working your way through it a passage at a time, asking God to reveal insights to you, to convict you, to reveal sin in you.

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For Further Study of the Beatitudes, Matthew 5-9

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Proverbs 29:23; Isaiah 57:15; Isaiah 66:1-2; Ezekiel 11:17-20; Ezekiel 18:30-32;

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Isaiah 51:3; Isaiah 61:1-3; Isaiah 66:10

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Psalms 37, especially v11; Isaiah 57:13ff; Isaiah 61:7; Isaiah 66:1-2

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Psalms 23:1-3; Isaiah 51:1-3; Isaiah 59:1-20; Isaiah 61:1-11;

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

God showed Israel mercy over and over and over and over again.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Psalms 24:1-6 (v4); Psalm 51:1-19 (v10);

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

God established sacrifices of atonement so that his people could be reconciled with him and each other.

Numbers 5:5-7; Jeremiah 33:6-9; Hosea 1:1-11; Micah 7:8