

Reading the Sermon on the Mount with John Stott
Daily reading from Chapter 1: Matthew 5:1-6 “Developing Spiritual Character”

Listening to Jesus

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

Everybody who has ever heard of Jesus of Nazareth and knows anything at all about his teaching must surely be familiar with the beatitudes, the first statements of the Sermon on the Mount. Their simplicity of word and depth of thought have attracted each new generation of Christians and students of religion from every culture. The more we explore how to respond to the challenge of these verses, the more seems to remain to be explored. Their wealth is inexhaustible. We cannot reach the bottom.

Before we are ready to consider each beatitude separately, we need to consider some general issues.

The people. The beatitudes set out the character of a Christian, a Christ-follower. These are not eight separate and distinct kinds of disciples—some who are meek, others who are merciful, still others who are called to endure persecution. They are instead eight qualities to be found in the same person—one who is meek and merciful, poor in spirit and pure in heart, mourning and hungry, peacemaker and persecuted, all at the same time.

Furthermore, those who exhibit these marks are not just an elitist group, a set of spiritual saints or church leaders who dwell above the common, everyday Christians. On the contrary, the beatitudes are Jesus’ own specification of what every Christian ought to be. All these qualities are to characterize all his followers.

The qualities. Some students of the Sermon have argued that Jesus is making a statement about social justice when he talks about the poor and the hungry. They think Jesus is calling his followers to right the inequalities and injustices of the world. Jesus was certainly not indifferent to physical poverty and hunger, but the blessings of his kingdom are not primarily economic. The poverty and hunger to which Jesus refers in the beatitudes are spiritual conditions. It is “the poor in spirit” and “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” whom Jesus blesses.

The church has always been wrong whenever it has used Jesus’ blessing of those who are “poor in spirit” either to condone poverty in general or to commend the voluntary poverty of those who take a vow to renounce possessions. Jesus may call some of his followers to a life of sacrifice and even poverty, but that is not what he had in mind when he spoke God’s blessing on those who see themselves as empty-handed before God’s bountiful table of grace.